



353 Days by **pathvain aelien**

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Summary: He called her every night for 353 days. A series of one-shots from that time. Mileven, mileven, mileven.

1. Day 1-Castle Byers

Castle Byers

She goes to Mike's first.

It's the only place she wants to go, the only place she needs to go. Mike will be worried about her. He is *already* worried about her. She knows it's true, because she saw the look on his face, the last time they looked at each other. They both thought it was the last time. She knows it's true, because Mike cried. She saw his tears. She saw the broken look on his face. She hated hurting him, but she was saving him from something worse. From the monster.

And she has saved him. Mike is safe, because the monster is dead. She's not sure how long she's been missing, but it can't have been long. The Bad Men were searching the school when she left. She had to be very careful. She's glad she hasn't been missing for long, because Mike needs her. He needs to know she's okay. And she is okay. She is mostly okay. She is hungry and cold, but she is okay. She is more tired than she has ever been, but she is okay. She's alive. And she will see Mike soon. And that makes her feel *more* than okay. It makes her feel happy. It's the reason she's walking fast, even though she's tired. Even though she knows it hasn't been very long since she saw him, it feels like a long time.

She knows where Mike's house is. Lucas and Dustin walked her back to his house, the night a body was pulled out of the quarry. The first time Mike was angry with her. Even if she hadn't known how to find his house, she'd still know. She has the magnet feeling. She can find him anywhere. It's how she knows he's at his house, and not anywhere else. She can feel him. He's very close.

Eleven doesn't notice the cars parked in the driveway. She's too tired to notice them, and too focused on seeing Mike again. She doesn't notice anything's wrong until she does. It just happens. She wouldn't know how to explain it; it's just something she feels. It's a feeling of being watched. Of being hunted. It's just *instinct*, and she knows what *instinct* means, even if she doesn't know the word. The instinct feeling causes her to approach the window cautiously, instead of just

opening the door to the basement.

She sees Mike first. She *always* sees Mike first, no matter who he's with. She smiles because even though it hasn't been long, it's also been too long. *Forever*. She's so happy to see him; she almost forgets the hunted feeling. Almost. Until she sees movement through the window. She sees Mike's parents. She sees the men. The Bad Men. She knows they are only there for one reason, because she is the reason. She is *always* the reason. Her heart sinks. Is Mike in danger? Does he need her help? She will help him if she can, but she's very tired. Drained. She doesn't know how much help she can be right now.

Mike is talking to the men. The men have guns. She can't see them, but she knows they're there. It's the hunted feeling, which is a bad feeling. But the men are hiding their guns, and that makes Eleven feel a little better. They are hiding their guns because they aren't going to use them. They are just talking. And she knows exactly what they want to know. They want to know where *she* is. It never crosses her mind that Mike will tell them anything. She knows he never would. She knows he never will. Mike will always keep her safe, if he can. She's not surprised at all when she hears Mike. He says he doesn't know where she is. And he will never tell them where she is, even if he *did* know. The Bad Men have no idea she's right outside the window.

But Mike does. He turns his face toward the window. It's not just a passing glance, he *knows*. Part of him knows. Somehow. He can feel her. He has the magnet feeling, too. He can't see her, even though she sees him. Their eyes are locked even if he isn't aware of it. It makes her smile and cry at the same time, because she knows now that she can't come home. Not yet. Mike is safe right now, but he won't be if she comes home. The Bad Men will know. They already suspect, because one of them is looking out the window, too. They will hurt Mike. They will try. She will kill anyone who tries to hurt Mike. She can do it. She's done it before.

But she can't right now. She's too tired. She used too much of her power and she can't right now. She knows her power can't keep him safe right now, but she can still keep him safe. The only way she can keep him safe is by leaving. The idea breaks her heart, even if it's

only for a little while. She wants to come home, and Mike wants her to come home. She can see it in his face. She closes her eyes to block it out, because if she keeps looking at him, she'll come home anyway. She'll have to.

Instead she turns and flees, hiding in the trees and brush as the Bad Men search for her. She cries silently, so they don't hear her. She only hopes that Mike will know. She is safe. She is near, even if she can't come home yet.

When she no longer hears their footsteps and voices calling for her, she stands up. She leaves. She doesn't run, because that would make too much noise, and they might still be near. She walks as quickly and quietly as she can. She doesn't know where she's going, she just has to go. She doesn't try to find her other friends, because she knows the men will be there, too. The only way to keep them safe is to stay away from them.

She's very tired. It's cold outside, but she'll have to sleep outside. She just needs to get as far away as possible first. She keeps walking, forcing one step in front of the other. She starts to doze off without being aware of it, but she keeps walking. She keeps walking until she steps on a dry branch and the crack of it breaking snaps her awake. She looks around fearfully, but there's nothing there. Nothing *living*, anyway. Nothing except a fort in front of her. She smiles a little when she sees the sign. *Castle Byers*. She's been in Castle Byers before, but only in the Upside Down, and that doesn't count.

She tentatively moves the blanket aside and walks in, crouching a little. It's nice. It's a lot warmer inside than it is outside. It's the perfect place to sleep, at least for tonight. She senses that it won't be safe to stay here, not for very long. But she will sleep here tonight. She's only met Will once, but that was in the Upside Down, so maybe it doesn't count. She's not sure. But she *is* sure he wouldn't mind sharing Castle Byers with her. She looks around curiously, because, now that she's safe and a little warmer, she isn't as tired. She sees Will's drawings. He's very good, much better than she is. She sees his pictures. She smiles at the pictures of her friends. She's as happy as she can be right now. Even if she can't be with her friends, they are still here. With her. She takes one of the pictures and gently runs a finger over their faces. Dustin is laughing, Lucas is smiling. Will and

Mike are holding a trophy. She traces their faces with her finger, letting it linger on Mike.

Something splashes the picture and her finger moves to her eyes, instead. She's crying again, and she didn't even realize. She wipes her eyes and pulls the blankets back from the makeshift bed before pulling them over her. She usually sleeps on top of blankets, but she's still a little cold. She keeps the picture in her hand and tries to get warm. Will has a stuffed animal. It's a lot like one she used to have, back in the lab. She stares at it. Part of her wants to move it away from her, because she doesn't like to think about the lab. But this is a different stuffed animal. It's Will's, and he is her friend. Or he will be, someday. She clutches it to her chest instead, and looks at the picture again. She's still looking at it when she finally falls asleep.

Two days later, Mike, Dustin, and Lucas are looking for Eleven. They've been searching the woods, just in case. Will is still in the hospital, although he wishes he could join them. He's anxious to meet the girl who saved him.

"El!" Dustin cries, cupping his hands over his mouth as they walk.

"ELEVEN!" Lucas shouts. They are searching for any sign. Dustin half-heartedly jokes that maybe they'll find a box of Eggos, and then they'll *know*.

"I don't know why you think she might be in the woods," Lucas tells Mike. He's afraid of pointing it out to his friend, because his friend looks terrible. Lucas isn't the most sensitive of the party, but it's obvious. Mike's face is drawn and white. Lucas knows it's impossible for him to have lost any weight in only a couple of days, but Mike looks skinnier. And he was *already* skinny.

"We have to try," Mike mumbles, without looking at him.

"She would go to your house first, though," Lucas points out. He can see Mike hesitate. "What?"

"I think...maybe she did. Maybe she tried."

Dustin and Lucas goggle at him. "What? When?" Dustin asks.

"The night she disappeared. Right after. When those assholes came over."

Lucas and Dustin exchange a glance. "Are you sure?"

Mike sighs. "No, but..." He struggles to put it into words. "I looked out the window. I felt someone watching me. It felt like...*her*. I think she was there." His friends don't know how to respond to this, so Mike continues. "She would have seen the Bad Men," he says, unconsciously referring to them the same way Eleven does. "She would have known she couldn't come home yet, so she may be hiding somewhere close by."

Dustin nods and Lucas doesn't respond. It's *possible*, he knows, but it's also possible that Mike just can't let her go. Lucas hasn't fully processed what happened yet. He doesn't know if Eleven is alive or dead. He doesn't know what happened to her, but he's more than willing to look for her.

They've reached Castle Byers. Dustin's packed a lunch for them, because they plan to stay out all day, if they can. Dustin ducks into the fort, with the others trailing behind him. Mike moves to the makeshift bed while Dustin unloads the sandwiches. The covers are rumpled. He moves Will's stuffed animal and sits down. He hears a crinkle and sees a picture half-buried under his leg. He pulls it out and looks at it, sees his friends and himself in the photo.

"Must have fallen down," Dustin says, around a mouthful of sandwich. He hands one to Mike. "Here."

Mike doesn't take it. "It *fell down*? It was across the room!" He calls it a *room* instead of a fort, because it *does* feel like a room. Will's made it as cozy as possible.

Dustin shrugs and Mike looks at the photo again. His mouth is dry and his heart is pounding because *maybe she was here*. *Maybe this is a sign*. A sign that she's okay. Dustin sees the look on his face and understands immediately. He sits next to him, and when he speaks, it's in a curiously gentle voice. "Mike. Will's been in here a lot without us. And Jonathan and Mrs. Byers, they were here, too. Maybe they moved it."

Mike's eyes are starting to sting, so he keeps them fixed on the photo instead of on his friend. Dustin seems to notice that, too, because he pats him once on the shoulder and then joins Lucas on the floor to look at comics. Mike's grateful for that, grateful they're giving him a moment alone. He sees something splash on the picture and wipes his eyes. Breathes. When Mike feels more in control of himself, he gets up. Drops the picture on the pile of blankets and joins his friends. He has the magnet feeling Eleven sometimes gets, but he doesn't understand it like she does. He ignores the magnet feeling that Eleven always trusts. Dustin is right. Will's here all the time, even when they aren't with him. His mom and brother were here when he was missing.

Anyone could have moved that picture.

2. Day 11-Her Name Was Eleven

His mom is on the phone.

Nothing earth-shattering there, she's on the phone for at least an hour a day. Probably more, only he's not there to see it. The phone rang just a couple of minutes ago, right when he got home, so she'll be busy for awhile. Too busy to ask him about his day.

So he doesn't give it a second thought as he opens the fridge. He's only a little hungry, but opening the fridge after school is just part of his routine. He's contemplating last night's ham when he feels an odd prickling on the back of his neck. It's a sensation that almost everyone is familiar with, the feeling that someone is watching. And possibly pissed off. He pauses with the Pyrex dish in one hand and sneaks a glance back at his mom.

Yep. She's staring at him. *Glaring* at him, in fact. And not in that mild *not before dinner* kind of way. It's the kind of glare that pins him in place and freezes his hand to the fridge door even though he suddenly doesn't give a shit about having an after-school snack.

He wishes he'd taken a closer look at her before dismissing the phone call. She's standing upright, not in her usual casual slouch while chatting with her friends. She's twisting the cord around one finger, the way she always does when she's upset. Or angry. Or both. His heart sinks a little, then sinks a little more when she pulls the cord taut before letting it spring back.

It's a bad sign, and he thinks he knows the reason for the phone call.

He turns back to the ham and slides it back into place on the shelf, trying to look as casual as possible. *Nothing to see here. Just decided I could wait until dinner after all.* He closes the door and tries to retreat as inconspicuously as he can. Maybe he can avoid the lecture, at least until dinner? There's no chance she'll forget, he's not that stupid, but maybe out of sight, out of mind will still work at defusing the rage. At least a little. He decides to see what Lucas is up to.

He makes it approximately two steps before she snaps her fingers

together, and points at the kitchen floor.

Don't even think about it.

Fuck.

He slumps against the fridge and waits, feeling a hot mix of shame and anger and worry. Things he isn't used to feeling, because he's never been that kind of kid. The kind of kid that warrants phone calls from school. The kind of kid that disappoints his mom in any other way than leaving his dirty clothes lying around.

It's not a good feeling.

And he doesn't have any excuses. His mind, usually so imaginative, is frantically trying to come up with one, but it's not working. The only thing in his mind at the moment is the word *caught*. Endlessly and annoyingly repeating. And he can't exactly tell her the truth, either, can he?

His mom hangs up the phone. Gently. Although he can tell she really would prefer to have thrown it across the room. He meets her eyes and tries again to look casual. *I have no idea what you're upset about. What's for dinner?*

"Sit."

Mike gives up all pretense of casual. Casual is not going to happen. Casual may actually make things worse. He sits. Waits.

His mom is waiting, too, and the expression on her face hurts his heart a little. He can tell she doesn't know what to say any more than he does. Neither one of them have any experience with this. She's angry but he's seen her angry before. It's the bewilderment in her eyes that hurts him the most, and there's nothing he can do about it. And to be honest, he wouldn't change it even if he could. Not considering the alternative.

Later the phone calls will induce the same anger, but not the bewilderment. She'll be used to it. This is just the first of many calls.

They stare at each other for a couple of seconds that feels a lot

longer. To both of them. Then she takes a deep breath.

"That was Mr. Clarke on the phone."

"Oh."

He doesn't sound surprised because he isn't surprised. Who else would it be? And, if he's been honest, he doesn't blame Mr. Clarke in the slightest. He's doing his job. When he couldn't-when Mike wouldn't-talk to him at school, his teacher did the only thing he could.

"Oh?" His mom repeats, and her voice is a lot colder as anger takes the forefront again.

Mike waits. He'd help her out if he could. But he can't.

"Please explain to me how you are suddenly failing your science class."

Mike shrugs. "It's a lot harder now?" It's a feeble attempt but it's the best he can do. Maybe it will even work. Science isn't his best subject, after all, even if the teacher is his favorite.

"I would maybe give you the benefit of the doubt if Mr. Clarke hadn't told me you've also been *skipping* his class. Since when do you *skip class*, Michael?"

"Um. Because it's a lot harder now?" In a way it's actually the truth.

"Michael. Mr. Clarke says he has tried to talk to you, more than once. He's tried to help you and you said everything was fine. He offered to tutor you after school to catch you up, and you said everything was fine. So what is going on?"

Mike shrugs again and he's angry again, but this time he's angry with her. He can't help it. He can't control it. He just is. "Everything has been pretty difficult lately, in case you haven't noticed," he snaps. "Nancy hasn't exactly been doing great, either, but you aren't lecturing her." For once, he's not even trying to get Nancy in trouble. It's just the truth. He isn't the only Wheeler skipping school these days.

Her eyes soften a little. Not much, but a little. "Honey...Barbara is still missing. I don't condone skipping school for any reason, but she's worried about her friend. And, in case *you* haven't noticed, Nancy is also grounded. But Will is fine. I know you've gone through a hard time, and I can't imagine what that felt like for you, but Will is *okay*. You've seen him. And Joyce says he'll be back in school in a couple of days."

It's the perfect excuse, and he never thought of it. He tries to keep a neutral expression on his face but it's too late. His mom has already seen the astonishment on his face. He couldn't have telegraphed it more openly if he'd written the words *this is not about Will* on his forehead.

They stare at each other, mother and son, each studying the other before speaking. Then his mother says very carefully, "This is about that girl, isn't it?"

Mike shrugs again, but the expression on his face is cautious enough, *open* enough, that she knows she's right. And she's not sure what to do about it, because it's a minefield. She knows the girl was trouble, and was *in* trouble, and she knows Mike tried to help her. She knows the girl is dangerous. She knows that people died. And that's all she knows. Since she doesn't know what to say, she repeats the things she's heard. She takes care to say them gently.

"Mike. You heard those men."

His face closes as neatly as when she shuts the windows. He watches her with a neutral expression and it throws her off guard because she's never been able to *not* read him before. At least a little.

"I know you wanted to protect her, because that's the kind of person you are. And that's good, normally that's good. But I don't think you understand the situation."

The carefully neutral expression gives way to incredulity. And something else. "*I don't? I don't understand the situation?*"

Karen takes another deep breath. *Minefield*. "No, honey, you don't. She was dangerous. I don't understand it completely and I don't

pretend to. But I know *that*. People died. And I know you thought she was your friend, but..."

Mike is done with this conversation. He shoves his chair back with enough force to topple it over. Holly shrieks from the sudden crash but his mom doesn't look angry, just sad and worried and it pisses him off because she doesn't know *anything*.

"She was only as dangerous as they made her be."

His voice is cold and remote and unrecognizable. She doesn't know what to say.

"And she was my friend. You don't know anything about her, so don't pretend you do."

Karen watches her son, suddenly so alien to her, run down the basement stairs. She doesn't follow.

Holly is still crying. Karen stands up from the table slowly and starts toward the sound, but she doesn't get very far. Nancy is watching her, sizing her up carefully. Karen gives a tiny little gasp of surprise and then tries to laugh.

"You scared me! How was school?"

Nancy doesn't deign to reply, not verbally, anyway. She merely raises one eyebrow as if to say *cut the bullshit, mom*. Karen sighs.

"Mike's been skipping school," Karen says, answering the unasked question.

"I know," Nancy replies curtly. She doesn't look at her mother, just grabs a yogurt from the fridge. Karen is taken aback, both at the tone and the casual dismissal of the topic. She tries again.

"He's still upset about *that girl*."

Nancy gives her a withering look. "You think?"

"I tried to explain..."

"I'm sure you did."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Nancy's expression softens a little at the hurt and honest confusion in her voice and she considers her mother very carefully before answering.

"It means...that you don't know anything about her." The words are spoken gently enough, but there's a finality there that's as alien as the expression on her face. Although it's not entirely alien, is it? She saw it on Mike's face, too. Karen doesn't understand. She doesn't understand how her children can feel, honestly feel, they are better informed than her. And she doesn't understand how, deep down, she agrees with them.

"And *that girl* had a name."

"Pardon?"

"Her name was Eleven."

Karen doesn't know how to respond to that, but it doesn't matter, because Nancy doesn't give her a chance. She goes upstairs without a backward look. In a book, this would be the time when brother and sister put aside their differences and bond through their shared pain. But this isn't a book. She doesn't go to the basement to do what her mother can't. She's still too full of her own grief to be able to do that. The best she can do, right now, at least, is what she's already done.

Karen watches her go, but doesn't follow. Holly is still screaming. She picks up Holly from her playpen and soothes her as best she can. She can still do that with at least one of her children, and that makes her feel a little better.

Karen broods over her children-two of her children-until dinner. She doesn't know what to do about Nancy and she has even less idea of what to do about Mike. She settles for doing nothing. She doesn't consult her husband and she doesn't bother lecturing Mike again. She simply tells him-quietly, after they've eaten- to stop skipping class and hopes that will be the end of it.

Even though she knows that it won't be.

3. Days 5-18-Will and Won't

A big thank you to my beta AliKattt (as always)

Mike broods in the basement, kicking a couple of toys over. He's angry and it's stupid but he can't help it. He knows she doesn't understand and he can't *make* her understand. He knows he can't tell her the truth. And he can't tell Mr. Clarke the truth, either. He knows he's acting like an asshole at school and at home and he also knows that he can't help that, either. And he doesn't like that feeling. He doesn't like being the asshole and he's not used to it.

And it's horrible. It's fucking horrible.

Talking with Mr. Clarke after school today was as bad as talking to his mom a few minutes ago. Worse, actually, because he's never let Mr. Clarke down before and he lets his mom down in a hundred insignificant ways every day. And he saw the honest concern, the worry, in his teacher's eyes. An expression that made Mike feel sick because he didn't know what to do about it. And when Mike was evasive, almost but not quite rude, to avoid the conversation, the expression didn't turn to anger or irritation or anything remotely resembling it. The concern had only deepened, followed by a look of hurt bewilderment. The same look in his mom's eyes. Apparently he causes that look wherever he goes and he can't do anything about that because he's feeling that way himself. Hurt and bewildered.

And he doesn't know how to make it better.

It starts the first day back at school. Nothing is normal but they all pretend it is. At first. They eat lunch and Dustin cracks jokes and they all talk about how great it will be when Will comes back. It feels weird to be here but they aren't the only ones feeling that way. Mike catches a couple of his teachers exchanging looks in the halls and knows they're feeling it, too. The school had been closed for a couple of days and everything *looks* normal but somehow that just really drives home the abnormality of it all.

After lunch they go to their lockers, walking the same hall where a dozen dead bodies lay just a few days ago. The floors have been

replaced and there's no trace of anything out of the ordinary. All three boys glance back at the wall and if they hadn't been there that night, they wouldn't have believed a monster ever broke through it.

Everything is pristine.

And it seriously creeps him out. He doesn't know why. It's not like he *wants* to see a bunch of dead bodies and destruction and blood everywhere, but somehow this seems like glossing over not just the damage but the past. What really happened that night. There's no sign of her, no sign of the damage. It's like nothing ever happened. Like *Eleven* never happened.

"Am I the only one that thinks this is really fucking weird?" Dustin mutters, grabbing his binder from his locker.

"No," Lucas and Mike answer in unison.

"Oh, that's good. Well, not that it's good, just, you know..."

"You're babbling," Lucas says.

"I'm well aware of that. I think this kind of situation calls for a little bit of babble, don't you?"

Lucas rolls his eyes at Mike and they all laugh, and it's a little better. Mike feels some of the tension leaves his shoulders, at least until they're in front of Mr. Clarke's classroom. The door is wide open and he can see inside and it's just as pristine as the rest of the school. Even the blackboard has been replaced. Everything is the same as it always has been, and that's when it happens. He stops in front of the door, and Lucas stops, too. Dustin only stops because he smacks against Lucas's unmoving back.

Mike takes a tiny step forward and then it happens again. His feet quit working, as if they are simply saying, *no thank you. Not today. I am all scienced out for the day. Maybe tomorrow.*

Or not.

"I can't go in there." The baldness of the statement shocks all of them. "I *won't* go in there."

Mike tears his gaze away from the open door and glances at his friends. There's a slightly shameful expression on his face, as if he knows he's being ridiculous and he's worried they're going to laugh at him. Deep down he knows better, but he can't help what he feels. Until he sees their faces. Dustin looks merely unhappy, but Lucas...

There's a tight, strained look on his face that feels familiar. Mike knows that if he were to glance in a mirror, he'd see the same expression on his own face. The look is completely alien on Lucas. There's not a trace of his usual bravado.

"Yeah...I think we could use a longer lunch," Lucas says, and pushes around Dustin to lean against the wall. Mike is still standing in front of the door, blocking it, staring into the classroom and just generally freaking Lucas out. Lucas grabs his arm and forcibly moves him so a couple of other kids can squeeze in. Mike shifts his gaze from the classroom to Lucas, and Lucas nods once. It makes Mike feel a little better. A little less alone, because Lucas feels it, too.

"What are you guys talking about? Are you guys talking about skipping class? *Mr. Clarke's class*? We can't skip Mr. Clarke's class!" Dustin sounds scandalized, as if Lucas has proposed that they all attend naked.

"I think we can. And we will," Lucas says. Partly he's looking out for Mike, but he also has a more selfish motivation. He's just not ready to be in that room again. Not yet. They almost *died* in that room. One of them *did*. He'd tried to save them all, but he couldn't. She had died saving them, and it's killing him with guilt. It's ridiculous but like Mike, he can't help how he feels. He'd let her down, not just that day but almost every day he'd known her. So yeah, he can do without another reminder of that fact today.

Dustin shakes his head. "You guys do what you want. I seriously can't skip class."

"Okay," Lucas says, shrugging.

"I can't!"

"I am not asking you to, Dustin."

"Lucas!"

"Jesus. Just *get in there*. We'll be...well, somewhere else. We'll see you after class."

Dustin gapes at them both. He understands the *why* of this situation, he'd have to be fucking *blind* not to see it, but it's *skipping class*. He has never skipped class. *He makes straight A's, for God's sake.*

Dustin doesn't try to convince them to join him. They are his best friends and he knows exactly what they are feeling, and why. Mike is so white he looks like he might pass out, and even Lucas is looking distinctly flustered. He pauses to gape for a moment. *Lucas. Flustered. Jesus.*

Dustin hoists his bag higher on his shoulder, still hesitating. "You guys going to be okay?"

"Yep," Lucas says. It's almost the truth. Close enough. They'll be a lot more okay out here in the hallway or on the freaking moon than they would be in that classroom at the moment. "Don't worry about us."

"Well...okay. I'll take notes." Dustin nods with more conviction than he feels and takes a couple of steps toward the door. Mr. Clarke glances up and smiles at him and Dustin smiles back, feeling a little more confident. Then Mr. Clarke goes to the board and writes the stages of mitosis and Dustin follows the progress of the chalk in his hand on the brand-new board. The board that has replaced the one that was destroyed a couple of days ago. The one that had a Demogorgon pinned against it. A monster from another plane of existence.

The room looks perfect, warm and inviting and the sunlight is streaming in through the window and *he loves science, for fuck's sake*. And his desk is right there, right in front of him, all he has to do is sit down. But he can't. Because his desk is *also* a desk that was swept aside as a Demogorgon was thrown across the room.

This is the room where everything happened.

Where Eleven...well...*something*. He doesn't know for sure and maybe

he doesn't even want to know, not if what he thinks happened actually happened. But something happened, right here. And a new blackboard and a fresh coat of paint can't quite cover that up. Not in his mind. He can still see it the way it was.

"Will you be joining us today, Dustin?" Mr. Clarke asks, jolting him a little. Dustin jerks his gaze away from the desk-and the curious stares of his classmates-and looks at his favorite teacher. Mr. Clarke doesn't look annoyed, and that's only one of the many things Dustin loves about him.

"Actually...no."

"I'm sorry?"

"I just remembered-I left-I left uh, something. In the cafeteria. I'll just, you know, go there. And get it. The thing that I left."

He doesn't wait for Mr. Clarke's response, he just darts for the door amidst the snickering and giggling and *some of his classmates are really just assholes, aren't they?*

Mike and Lucas are wandering idly down the hallway while trying to look like they are doing anything besides wandering idly, but Dustin knows idling when he sees it. He catches up to them quickly and neither of them looks surprised.

"Decided I wasn't really in the mood for science today."

"Yep."

"Besides, I already read the chapter."

"That's true."

"So what do people *do* when they skip class, anyway?"

They both shrug. Dustin sighs.

A few minutes later they are sequestered in a bathroom, because where the hell else are they going to go? Most of the classroom doors are both A. open and B. full of teachers, so they can't exactly just

stroll past them, can they?

Dustin moodily scratches an X onto a sheet of paper. Lucas yawns and makes an O.

"I always thought skipping was supposed to be fun?"

Mike doesn't say anything, he's just staring off into space. Lucas helps him out.

"Maybe it's just something that you have to, you know, practice at."

"I *knew* we weren't doing it right. This blows."

They continue bickering, but quietly, because the one thing they do know about skipping is that you aren't supposed to get caught. Mike watches them for a bit, feeling oddly lighter. Everything sucks right now, but at least they're together. And they are with him, really with him. They know exactly how he feels.

"Let's play hangman," he says suddenly, and for the next half hour they do.

But that only takes care of the problem for *today*. It only *avoids* the problem for one day. Mike tells himself that he will walk right into that classroom tomorrow, but he also brings a book in his backpack. So part of him must have been aware of the lie. Lucas and Dustin don't skip again, and he doesn't blame them. But he's not ready yet. He spends the time reading-or pretending to read. When he can't pretend to concentrate anymore he doodles on the bathroom wall. He's never done that before, but he tells himself it doesn't really matter. There's graffiti everywhere and a little more won't hurt. When he gets bored with that, he gets inventive. He won't be able to hide in a bathroom every day. At least it's Friday. He has all weekend to mull it over. On Monday he's struck with debilitating stomach cramps right before class and spends the period in the nurse's office, conveniently recovered just enough that he won't have to call his mom.

He keeps up with the classwork. At first. Dustin or Lucas always give him notes and his assignment, refraining from commenting on his

absence. But he loses interest and doodles on the papers instead. He's not Will and his doodles are just doodles, but he'd rather be doing that than his homework. He doesn't enjoy it anymore, like he used to. It's almost funny. He's been pushed around and beaten up and picked on for *years* for genuinely liking his classes, and now he doesn't give a shit about them, either. Or at least about this *particular* class. He just can't. It's ruined somehow. There's a shadow hanging over it and he knows the shadow has a name.

He can't talk to his parents, and he doesn't want to talk to Lucas and Dustin. They mean well but they don't really know how to help him. And they're dealing with it in their own ways. It's a little better with Will. He just *listens*. But Mike doesn't want to burden him, because he's been through enough. That only leaves one person, and he talks to her every night. He doesn't know if she can hear him or if she's beyond hearing him now, but it comforts him.

But it doesn't solve his problem. He doesn't run out of excuses, but he runs out of breathing room.

He's in his English class, a class he still enjoys, when Mr. Clarke knocks and enters. Both teachers confer quietly and Mike knows what's coming.

"Oh shit," Dustin says, giving Mike a look.

"Mike, could I speak with you for a second?" Mr. Clarke asks, and everyone swivels in their chairs to stare at him. Mike would sink into the floor if he could, but he can't, so he rises and walks as quickly as possible. He avoids all eye contact, even when Mr. Clarke shuts the door behind them.

"I haven't seen you in class this week," Mr. Clarke says.

"Um, no. I've been sick."

"I've heard," Mr. Clarke says drily, and Mike blushes a little. "I can't help but notice that you aren't turning in your work anymore. That would be concerning with any student but...it's not something I've ever expected from you."

Mike keeps his eyes on his shoes. There's a tiny little hole near his pinky toe that he's never noticed before.

"And it definitely concerns me. You're a good student; you've always been one of my best students. I thought maybe, with everything that's happened lately, that you've been feeling a little pressured. A little on edge. But now I see you're attending your other classes, so that pokes a hole in my hypothesis, doesn't it?"

Mike doesn't respond and Mr. Clarke doesn't wait for a response. His voice is gentle and it breaks something inside of Mike to hear it. He'd much rather Mr. Clarke just yell at him or give him detention. "Maybe you're having trouble with the work? I understand how that might feel to you, if you've never had trouble with a concept before. How scary that might feel. But that's okay. Everyone learns at a different pace and there is nothing wrong with needing a little more time on one concept or learning something the first try with another. We can get you caught up, easily. If you don't feel comfortable studying with your friends or asking them for help, I don't mind tutoring you after school a couple of days a week."

Mike tries to hide the horror he suddenly feels before Mr. Clarke can see it. Another couple of hours in that classroom? In *that* classroom? He can't even make it to a *class*, let alone extra time in that room.

"No! No, that's okay."

"Mike, there is nothing wrong with tutoring..."

"No, I know that. It's just, um. Yeah. I had a little trouble but I've figured it out now. I don't need tutoring, really."

Mr. Clarke pauses before forming a response. Mike is clearly agitated, white-faced and nervy. Obviously this has really been bothering him. Mr. Clarke is well aware that he's a favorite with some of his students and he knows how upsetting it can feel to disappoint-or *feel* you're disappointing-a favorite teacher.

"Well. I'm glad to hear it. If you change your mind, you know where to find me. And I'll be seeing you in class." It's not quite a question, although there's an upward inflection on the last word. Mike nods

mutely and manages a smile.

Fuck.

He doesn't really see a way out of this anymore.

So he takes the lesser of two evils. He obediently places one foot in front of the other until he is inside the classroom and keeps his eyes on his desk. On his book. On Dustin. Lucas. A pencil with a chewed eraser that's fallen to the floor. Anything besides the front of the classroom.

And he does his homework. Most of it. Enough to keep him out of tutoring, anyway. Enough to avoid any unnecessary attention. He figures it's safe enough to turn in mediocre work, especially since he's already established that he's been having trouble understanding the lessons recently. And he rebuffs Mr. Clarke whenever he broaches the idea of tutoring, which is frequently. Mike only skips occasionally, which means every other day, or whenever he really can't stand the idea of walking through that door. He doesn't bother studying for his test, because he figures he can pass it just fine. He doesn't need an A, or even a B. A C is just good enough to avoid any tutoring. It's a safe grade.

But apparently he wasn't safe at all, because Mr. Clarke has called his mom. Apparently he *did* actually need to study for that test. At least a little.

Shit.

He waits for his mom to start in with the lecture again and he waits for Mr. Clarke to force him into tutoring but neither one happens. He feels that it may happen, it is a distinct possibility, but it hasn't happened yet. Mike's read the phrase *standing on a knife edge* before and never understood it, but he understands it perfectly now. He doesn't know what to do about it, how to fix it, so he just waits. Waits to fall.

But he doesn't.

Because Will is back.

It's hard to say who is more overjoyed, the rest of the guys or Will himself. It's not exactly a surprise, they knew he was coming back today, but they can't help feeling excited. They wait for him in front of the school, and that's how Mike knows exactly how much they've been looking forward to this. Somehow the three of them on their bikes have beaten Joyce in her car. Dustin checks his watch until Mike forcibly removes it from his wrist but Lucas is playing it cool. He's feeding a couple of fat pigeons the crust of his peanut butter sandwich like it's just any other day.

"BYERS!" Dustin bugles, startling a couple of pigeons. And Mike. Mike lets Dustin's watch slip through his fingers and winces when he hears it crack on the pavement, but Dustin doesn't notice. He's sprinting toward Joyce's car and, when Will doesn't exit expediently enough, hurling open the door and pulling Will out by his backpack.

"Careful!" Joyce admonishes, as if Will is made of glass and might break as easily as Dustin's watch. She's sporting that too-bright, slightly anxious smile that's become her trademark since Will returned.

"Mmph," Will mumbles, because Dustin has him in a weird combination of a bear hug and a head-lock. Lucas tugs him free.

"Thanks," Will tells him, but the words are lost because now *Lucas* is hugging him and he's again in danger of suffocation.

"Sorry!" Lucas says, letting him go.

"You just saw me yesterday."

"Yeah, but that was at the hospital," Lucas says, as if that explains everything.

Will glances at Mike, who's holding himself back. He settles for clapping Will on the back.

"Oh, go ahead," Will says, and the resignation in his voice makes them all laugh. Mike hugs him quickly and thankfully doesn't try to crush him.

"Bye," Will says, peering in through the window.

Joyce's anxious smile widens a little and becomes even more apprehensive. "You call me if you need *anything*, okay? I've already talked to your teachers and they know to let you *call me* if you need-"

"I know." Will's voice is infinitely patient and her smile becomes a little more natural.

"We'll take good care of him, Mrs. B," Dustin reassures. "But we've got to go now; we're going to be late." School doesn't start for another fifteen minutes, but Dustin has some experience with overly fretful parents and he's become a master of reassuring and escaping. Joyce has time for one last wave before the other three boys whisk her son toward the doors.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Jesus, people are going to lose their *shit* when they see you."

Will looks a little nervous. "Yeah?"

"Yes! I mean, we had a memorial service for you."

"You told me."

"I'm just saying, you are going to be so cool now."

"Yeah, don't forget us when you're hanging out with all your new cool friends," Lucas teases. Will rolls his eyes and swats at him. Mike follows a couple of steps behind them, smiling a little. The smile becomes a grin when Dustin points a finger at him.

"And don't think I didn't notice that you broke my watch. You owe me five bucks."

"Aren't we even? You broke my Millennium Falcon when you kept dropping it like an idiot."

It's a casual mention of Eleven, so casual that Will doesn't even understand. And Mike's expression doesn't change or betray anything as it usually does when Eleven is mentioned, even abstractly. Dustin and Lucas exchange a loaded look. Lucas raises his eyebrows and

Dustin continues as if he hasn't noticed.

"I did not break it!"

"Yeah, one whole panel came off like, a day later. You totally broke it."

"That sounds like you had a defective product, Michael. Very sad."

"Defective after you dropped it four times, sure."

"Okay, now you owe me TEN bucks. For emotional damage."

"You BOTH owe me money, but you don't hear me complaining, do you?" Lucas breaks in.

"Oh, shut up, Lucas. That video game sucked, anyway." Dustin grabs a book out of his locker and conveniently blocks out both Lucas's face and his retort. He glares at Mike and nods judiciously. "And as for you, Wheeler, you'll be hearing from my lawyer."

Mike and Will both giggle.

"Was that a *giggle*? Are you giggling? Seriously?"

Mike and Will meet each other's eyes and that turns out to be a mistake, because suddenly they are both howling with laughter. Will laughs until he starts hiccupping, and then Dustin can't help himself. The sight of Will's scrawny little body sort of *sproinging* up and down with each hiccup just makes him lose it. He drops his books, but slowly. They kind of just slide out of his arms and down his body and then onto his feet and then *Lucas* is laughing, too. Dustin lets himself slump to the floor on top of his books. A couple of girls trying to get into their class give him a wide berth, like he might be contagious.

Will leans against Mike for support, because if he doesn't he's going to join Dustin on the floor. Mike feels the weight of him against his shoulder and it feels good. Will is *here*, really here. And Mike is *laughing*. When was the last time that happened? He can't remember. They are attracting a lot of stares and whispers and he couldn't care less. It's so weird to think how much things can change in just a couple of weeks. And then somehow, change right back. Things

seem...almost normal. And Mike's shoulders are once again free of the tension that seems to permanently reside there these days.

He stays there, laughing with his friends, until the bell rings.

It's a good day.

For a couple of hours, at least.

That's when things get fucked up.

None of them notice anything amiss at first. Sure, there's been a lot of pointing and hushed conversation everywhere they go but it doesn't faze them. Will's been absent for weeks and they've all been to his memorial service. Some of them were even at the funeral. It's only natural that there would be some conversation about his return. They don't realize anything is actually *wrong* until lunch, because it's the first time all day that Will's left their side.

Dustin spreads his lunch out in front of him. Sandwich, nilla wafers, peanut butter crackers, and a single, lonely piece of celery his mom apparently tried to sneak in with the rest of the goodies. He pushes it aside with one finger, toward Lucas. Lucas pushes it back. Dustin pushes it onto the floor.

"Big mistake not bringing a lunch, Byers. It's *unidentified species of meat squeezed into a loaf* day today."

"Well, you didn't warn me, now, did you?"

"I'm warning you now."

"Thanks." Will rolls his eyes. "Anybody want anything?"

"No. You can have my celery if you want." Dustin leans toward the right a little and spies the celery in a wad of gum. With an effort, he kicks it toward Will.

"Yeah, I think I'll pass on your floor celery."

Dustin snickers as Will joins the line-the very short line-for today's disgusting attempt at a nutritious lunch. He's only gone for a few

minutes and when he returns, he's visibly shaken.

"That bad?" Dustin commiserates, pushing half of his sandwich at him. Will stares at him blankly, then at the sandwich. He pushes it back. It's a repeat of the celery incident, but Dustin doesn't push it onto the floor this time. He takes a bite of it instead, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

"Nah, that's okay. I'm not really hungry."

"Jesus. It must have been really rank."

Will smiles a little but it's a wan smile. Dustin doesn't notice. Lucas doesn't notice. But Mike does. His perception seems to have widened in the last month and he sees a lot more than he used to. He saw Will leave them, relatively happy, and saw him rejoin them, agitated and upset. And now he sees Will avoiding eye contact and staring at the table and there's something familiar about the look on his face. In his eyes. It's a wounded, haunted look.

Mike doesn't say anything, but he lets his gaze drift past Will and toward the lunch line. A couple of kids are laughing and pointing and Mike knows exactly who the target is. And then he sees the perpetrators.

Troy and James. And another douchebag friend of theirs, David.

Mike narrows his eyes. Troy and James have avoided them-have gone out of their way, like, practically *leaping* out of their way-since the day at the quarry but nothing good lasts forever. Even at twelve, Mike knows this. And Will's always been their favorite target.

Mike doesn't say anything, but he gives Will the rest of his sandwich. And when Will tries to push it back, Mike stares him down until Will takes it.

Mike doesn't say anything then, and he doesn't say anything the next day when someone knocks into Will-accidentally on purpose-at their lockers. Will almost goes sprawling until Dustin grabs his arm and sets him to rights.

"Oops, sorry," a kid says, then laughs. And Mike doesn't even know

who the fuck he *is*, but he knows a mouth breather when he sees one. Unfortunately, it seems like at least one out of three of his fellow students fall into that category.

Mike doesn't say anything the day after *that* when someone puts glue in Will's chair in their history class, and he doesn't say anything when he's pelted with spitballs in their English class. He also, just for a change of pace, doesn't say anything when someone throws a note onto Will's desk and Mike reads *zombie boy* before Will scrunches it up and hides it in his backpack. And by that point, he is *really fucking sick* of not saying anything and he's actually bitten his bottom lip hard enough to bleed to avoid saying anything.

And he knows exactly who started all of this.

Troy and James have been careful to avoid Will, beyond laughing and pointing at him from a distance, but it can't be a coincidence that everything else that's happened has been at the hands of their friends. They have just enough working brain cells between them to know how to avoid blame. And retaliation. Assuming they're still scared of telekinetic girls.

Lucas is asking him something in a tone that lets him know he's been trying to get his attention for quite awhile now. Mike turns furious eyes on him and Lucas actually cringes a little from the heat in them. "What? What's wrong?"

Mike doesn't answer but Dustin leans forward and whispers something. At least *one* of them has figured out what's going on here.

Will doesn't appear to notice the sudden scrutiny of his friends. He's preoccupied with his own thoughts. Someone laughs and Will shrinks a little lower into his chair. A little more into himself. And now Mike recognizes the thing he saw at lunch that day. He doesn't know how he could have missed it, actually.

Eleven.

He sees Eleven in Will's eyes. That same hurt expression, the expression that doesn't show even a hint of surprise. *I know this is going to hurt*, it says. *I don't expect anything different.*

Because I'm different.

And neither one of them can-*could*-protect themselves. Not from that kind of hurt. Eleven only ever protected her friends. And Will is the same.

Mike should feel shocked. He should feel shocked that anyone could be that much of an asshole, not only to pick on someone with that kind of vulnerability, but also one that was supposedly dead just a couple of weeks ago. Some of these assholes were crying at his memorial service, for fuck's sake. And now they're happy to hurt someone that's a million times better than they can ever be. So he *should* feel shocked, but he isn't. He only feels a sort of weary contempt. Because he knows who these assholes become when they're adults. For the first time, Mike wishes Eleven were here for an entirely different reason because these people *definitely* deserve some broken limbs.

Mike doesn't have her power, but he can't just sit here and watch Will retreat further and further away from them. Will deserves better than this. He's been through hell.

That does shock Mike. Because somehow he's forgotten about that. Mike has been suffering so much he's been pretty blind to the suffering of anyone else. But Will has been through hell. He almost died, not just once, but repeatedly. He spent a week hiding from a monster in another dimension and he never thought he would live. And when he came back, Mike was there but wasn't there. Mike's been absent because he's been too preoccupied to really deal with anyone else.

Mike's suddenly ashamed of himself, because he's been pretty fucking selfish. He lost a friend, and that *sucks*, but he still has friends. And one of them needs him. Eleven isn't here to protect him, but she would if she were. She isn't here, but *he* is. He has to do something, but he's not sure what. Or how to begin, but when he watches Will carefully, he sees there's only one answer.

Will walks to class sandwiched in between Dustin and Lucas or Dustin and Mike and cringes whenever they pass anyone else. It doesn't matter who it is. He cringes when Troy presses himself

against the lockers to avoid them and he cringes when Mr. Clarke smiles at them before lunch. Enemy or friend. He no longer seems able to differentiate between the two. The only people that he doesn't shy away from are Mike and the rest of the guys. And even with them, it's different. He's there but not there. He holds himself carefully aloof. And his grades are suffering, just like Mike's. He doesn't care about his homework, or the A.V club, or hanging out with his friends after school. He doesn't even draw. He's just...there. And his only goal is making himself as small as possible.

Mike has a funny feeling that if a hole into the Upside Down opened up right in front of them, Will would seriously consider going through it. And Mike can't stand that. Will shouldn't have to feel more afraid *here*, with his friends, than he ever did in the Upside Down. He shouldn't have to feel that way, but he does. Mike sees it in his face. Being here, being the focus of every eye in a room...it's killing him. Not the way the Demogorgon would have, but a different way. It's killing him inside. He's giving up. Mike can't-*won't*-allow that to happen.

He won't lose Will, too.

But protecting your friends requires a sacrifice. He learned that just two weeks ago, from Eleven. It will be hard, but Mike can do it. He has to. He has to focus on the friends he still has, instead of the one he couldn't protect. He has to pull himself together, at least on the outside. On the inside, he's still a wreck. Maybe he always will be. He's not okay with that but he accepts that it's just a fact. But he has to hold himself together. He realizes he's a coward; they are *all* cowards, because they've never stood up to the bullies before. Not for themselves and not for each other. Instead, they avoid and hide and slink away, and, if one of them is caught, they retreat and merely comfort that person later. They've never stood up for each other, but someone else has taught them how. And when it came down to it, they stood up for *her*. The fact that they failed doesn't minimize the heroism. They *tried*. And that was against something a lot worse than a fucking middle-school bully. They can handle this, but someone has to make the first move. He's always been the leader of their party, whether he likes it or not. They look up to him, and (most of the time) they follow his lead. And right now, a party member requires

assistance.

Mike waits until after class. He doesn't say a word but it's okay this time, because he's just waiting. And when it happens, when his chance comes, he takes it. "I'll meet you guys outside."

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom. I'll be right out."

It's not an excuse. He *is* going to the bathroom, because that's where Troy is. Mike saw him walk in there a few seconds ago, and he knows he couldn't ask for a better opportunity. Troy is washing his hands when Mike comes in. He smirks but otherwise doesn't react because he's still cautious. All he knows is that Mike once had a friend who could kick his ass with her mind. For all he knows, she might still be around.

Mike waits for a few seconds, but Troy doesn't say anything or make the slightest move toward him. It's almost disappointing, because he can't really claim self-defense, can he? Although it *is* defense. For someone else.

"Hey, Troy."

Troy wads up a paper towel and tosses it toward the trash, but misses. He misses because Mike-*Mike Wheeler*-has tackled him and he's sprawled on the bathroom floor with Mike-*Mike fucking Wheeler*-on top of him. He outweighs Mike by about thirty pounds but he's too surprised to fight back. Until Mike punches him in the eye, and then he gets control of himself and shoves Mike away from him.

"What the fuck is your problem, Wheeler?" He doesn't really care about getting an answer, because Mike is going to be fucking dead before he can answer, anyway.

"Leave Will alone." Mike swings a fist at him and catches him somewhere in the vicinity of his ear because Troy snaps his head back reflexively. Troy shoves Mike away from him and he bounces off of the sink with a crash and it must hurt, it sure as hell sounds like it hurts, but Mike's already lunging for him again.

"I haven't been anywhere near that little freak all day," he puffs, scuffling with Mike. He hits Mike in the mouth and manages to get him in a head-lock and Mike can't get free but he doesn't really give a shit about fighting fair right now. Troy squeezes his neck but releases him immediately because there's a sudden sharp pain in his side and it's *Mike fucking Wheeler. Mike fucking Wheeler bit him*. He's pretty sure he's bleeding.

"*Jesus! What the fuck!* What is your problem?"

"*You. You* are my problem."

"I haven't done anything!" Troy almost bleats, because this is not how things are supposed to go. *Ever*. He glances down at his side and sees blood darkening his white shirt. Jesus. What a fucking *freak*.

"I know exactly what you've done. I know what you're getting *your* friends to do. And you'd better fucking stop."

Troy stops trying to examine the bite. Fuck the bite. No one talks to him like that, especially *Mike fucking Wheeler*. He pushes himself off of the wall, unaware he's been using it as a support. "You're dead, Wheeler."

Mike continues as if he hasn't spoken, as if he isn't about to get the shit beaten out of him. "I know all about your friends. Do you know about mine? Remember *my* friend?"

Troy stops.

"I bet you remember her."

Troy doesn't say anything.

"I bet you remember what she can do, right? Kind of hard to forget. But there *is* something you don't know."

Troy finally speaks. "What's that?"

"You know that night? At the school?"

Everyone knows about that night, or thinks they know. Russians or

Demogorgons, it doesn't really matter because a dozen dead bodies are a dozen dead bodies.

"*She* did that." Mike's voice is cold, but there's a little smile playing at his lips. It's a cruel, but somehow gentle smile and it's completely alien on his face. Troy leans against the wall again without being aware of it.

"Wh...what?"

"She did that. She killed them all."

"You're lying." Troy's pretty confident about that. At least a dozen men, grown men, *military* men, dead. There's no way a fucking kid did that, even one with some fucked-up power.

Mike's gentle little smile widens. "Nope. I was there. You might have heard that. Right? I saw it. I saw *everything*. She did that. With her mind. She didn't even blink."

"*Bullshit*," Troy whispers.

"She looked at them and she squeezed their brains and blood came out of their eyes until they were dead. *All* of them. All at once."

Troy doesn't have a response. He knows it's the truth. He can see it in Mike's eyes, in the alien smile on his lips.

"And you know *why* she did that?"

Troy shakes his head, mute with fear.

"Because we were in danger. Her friends were in danger. She was protecting us." Mike pushes past Troy, taking care to push a little harder than necessary. He opens the bathroom door and glances back, almost with disinterest.

"So you'd better leave Will the fuck alone. And tell your *friends* to leave him the fuck alone. Or she'll kill you. And if she doesn't, I will." Mike leaves without another backward look. He feels elated. That's probably fucked up, but he can't help it. That feeling is probably responsible for a lot of detentions after school and phone calls home

because this is just the first of many fights.

Although this is the only fight he'll have with Troy.

Troy takes his words to heart and backs the fuck off, and so do his friends. When another asshole comes along, Mike deals with him. He doesn't always win but he always tries. And eventually it works. Will still gets the occasional note or jeer but no one touches him. He's safe. And he *knows* he's safe. He sees Mike's bloody lip that day after school, and they all offer sympathy when Mike only mutters, "Troy." But the next day, he sees Troy's black eye, split lip, and a very colorful bruise on his cheek and understands what Mike's done. Has done for *him*. And he sees Mike, not just walking beside him in the halls, but sort of orbiting around him, keeping him away from everyone else. Keeping everyone else away from *him*. Like a human shield.

Dustin and Lucas quickly pick up on it, too and then he has *three* shields, and he's never alone. They shield him in the halls and they shadow him in the lunch line, even when they've brought theirs from home. They change their seating charts in class and he's now dead center in between them. Mike is behind him, and Lucas and Dustin flank him on either side. The only weak spot is right in front of him, but it doesn't matter, because Mike is always watching and no one touches him. His friends are everywhere around him, every second of the day. The idea should be suffocating but it's the opposite, for the first time all week he feels like he can breathe.

Mike sees it. He sees Will relax. He sees Will laughing. He sees that his eyes aren't distant anymore. He's *here*, and he'll *stay* here, because they're watching out for him. Before school, in gym, at their lockers, at lunch, everywhere.

And in every class.

The next time he's in front of Mr. Clarke's door, his feet try to falter. He doesn't let them.

I can't go in there. I won't go in there.

The voice is still there, and it's just as loud as ever, but he pushes it

away. This room is still the room where Eleven disappeared, but it's where he *needs* to be. For Will. He can't-*won't*-avoid it anymore. So he grits his teeth and places one foot in front of the other. He keeps his eyes on the back of Will's head to remind him of the sacrifice he needs to make. The sacrifice he will need to make, every day. He forces a neutral expression on his face. The expression says, *this is no big deal. Today is just like any other day, and this room is just a room.*

As he passes Mr. Clarke's desk, just when his footsteps become a little more tentative, he realizes Dustin and Lucas are flanking *him*. And Will is right in front of him, looking over his shoulder and making sure he's okay. Making sure he's with them. *They know*. They all know how hard this is for him, and Mike suddenly realizes *he's* being shielded, too. It doesn't erase what happened in this room, but it makes it bearable. He's with his friends. He's okay. And, if he's not, they'll be here protecting him.

Always.

4. Day 18-Kind of A Mess

It's sort of like the 10 Commandments.

Or 11 Commandments, actually. Although there aren't, like, technically speaking, 11 of them. Not yet, anyway. But the name is still pretty apt. It's somehow *le mot juste*, isn't it?

Well, maybe.

Dustin isn't actually quite sure what *le mot juste* means (he may have spaced out a little during a particularly boring English lesson) but it sounds good in his head so he's going to roll with it. He's extremely accomplished at *rolling with it*, actually. Better than his friends, most definitely.

It's not boasting if it's true.

He's the unflappable one. The one that, when faced with a new and unpleasant situation, can just shrug his shoulders and make the best of it. As long as his life isn't in imminent danger, anyway. Dustin doesn't delude himself on *that* score. When faced with immediate, physical danger he's a little more...well...flappable.

Is that a word?

It should be a word.

Whatever.

The point is, if there's an obstacle in front of him, he merely makes a tiny course correction and continues on his merry way. And that's what he needs to do right now. Although the obstacle isn't really in front of him, per se. It's more...ground into his carpet.

Son of a bitch.

And the vacuum cleaner is broken, too.

I am unflappable. I will not...flap.

Dustin always tries to find the silver lining. He uses the tip of his shoe to try to remove the worst of the mess, but it just kind of *squishes* and pushes further into the carpet. *Silver lining*, he reminds himself, trying not to sigh.

What's the silver lining here?

Well, the worst of the mess is on the carpet-*in* the carpet, but there's plenty left in the kitchen. Nice, (formerly) clean linoleum. He can use the broom for that. Huzzah. He makes a mental note to his future, adult self.

Dear future me, do not line your (our) mansion with carpet. Carpet sucks ass. Or don't have moody friends. Possibly avoid both, if you can.

Sincerely, me (You. Us?)

Dustin stretches a pair of pink rubber gloves over his hands and grabs at the chunks in the carpet, throwing them irritably onto a comic he's been meaning to give Mike for ages. It makes him feel just the tiniest bit (actually a lot) better.

No comic for you, Mike. That's what you get for throwing a hissy fit.

Well, you can't really blame him.

I certainly can blame him. I just did, didn't I?

Dustin's used to mentally arguing with himself. All creative, intelligent people hear voices. Not like, crazy voices telling you to kill people or wear a tinfoil hat around town or something. But creative, intelligent voices. Like Dustin's voices, because Dustin is both a. creative and b. intelligent.

It's not boasting if it's true.

As a person who is both creative and intelligent, Dustin simply needs to adjust. If his friends want to act like children, that's cool. He can be the adult here. What do you do with children? You take away whatever's getting them riled up. You help them avoid temptations. You ignore them when they start *fucking throwing food in your house while also screaming at you.*

Ugh. Dustin throws another clod of vaguely beige food onto the comic. It lands on Wolverine's face, obscuring it. Good. Wolverine can go fuck himself.

"I didn't mean that," Dustin amends. "I shouldn't take out my anger on you. Even if I am using you as a trash can right now. Sorry."

Mews watches him clean, sniffing the carpet where the worst of the mess is. Mews laps daintily with his tongue, testing the flavor, presumably, before taking a more confident bite. Dustin shrugs. Whatever works. His mom should be done with her errands any minute now so he really needs to clean this shit up.

"Thanks, buddy," Dustin says, letting Mews take over.

Anyway, he just needs to...adjust. Roll with it. He should also possibly avoid having real children in the future, because he'll have enough to deal with. Dustin makes another mental note to his future self. *Children suck. Your friends are basically your kids, and they suck, too, but you don't have to like, add to the misery.*

Dustin can adjust. No problem. He just needs some rules. Guidelines. Commandments, really, unless he wants the wrath of Mike to smite him again. And it's not very hard to come up with a mental list. Some of them have been there, unspoken but *there*, for the last 18 days.

Thou shalt not eat Eggos in His presence.

Even if they're fucking delicious and your mom gives them to you both for breakfast after a sleepover.

Don't eat them.

Instead you will cover them with a napkin and pretend they do not exist. (You can eat them when He leaves).

It's especially important to follow this commandment if you don't have a cat (or dog) to eat the inevitable mess that will occur when Mike is not pleased with this breakfast offering. Maybe the presence of an actual adult will contain his rage, but don't test that theory.

Just don't eat them.

In fact, don't even have them in your fucking freezer anymore.

Eggos no longer exist.

Not for you, anyway.

Dustin enjoys adding to the commandments. It amuses him. It's a dark kind of humor, but whatever works. ***Thou shalt always think in humor, because it's easier than dealing with the reality.***

Reality is bleak. Dustin can (and frequently does) pat himself on the back for being an ace at adapting, but the truth is he'd rather ignore the darker aspects of reality and make a joke of it instead. It's the only way he's coping. He's almost as fucked-up as Mike, he just has better camouflage. He has to hide it, because he's the unflappable one. Mike is fucking flapping all over the place, and someone needs to hold him steady. They're all trying, but Will is unsteady himself and Lucas is...well, Lucas. Lucas will defend his friends with his life (and how sad to live in a world where this is a proven fact instead of merely a pithy phrase) but he's not the greatest at the whole empathy thing. Or rather the expressing of empathy thing. Lucas would rather ignore anything that doesn't fit in with his world view and pretend he doesn't have feelings, because sometimes feelings suck. Lucas just soldiers on and turns a blind eye to anything that interferes with that.

Although he's been doing his best, and Mike needs a steady dose of that *get over it attitude*, too. Mike needs *all* of his friends. He needs Will to listen and Lucas to tell him to put it behind him and he needs Dustin, too. He needs his humor. Dustin muses over this for a second. Maybe he needs Mike the same way. *Mutualism*. It's just science. Dustin isn't sure which one of them is the parasite in this little metaphor (offhand he'd say, oh, probably Mike. The hurler of food) but whatever, they both benefit. He needs Mike to throw a fit every now and then so he doesn't have to. And Mike needs to be able to crack a smile at least a couple of times a day until it gets easier to do it without forcing it.

Dustin can oblige him. It helps him cope, too.

Hence the need for the commandments.

The 11 commandments. It's le *mot juste*. Possibly. Maybe he should consult a dictionary. Actually, he should really ask Mike what the hell it means. Dustin can only recall being shown a picture of a bewigged French poet with a consumptive face. Either from actual, you know, consumption, or possibly just a surfeit of rouge. Either way, it wasn't pretty. Yep. He'll definitely ask Mike. When Mike isn't inclined to hurl anything edible (or otherwise) at him, that is.

Dustin's a good friend. And this time he's not simply boasting (even to himself), it's just something he knows. Not a perfect friend, not by any means, but a good friend. He's not inclined to return fire on any of Mike's rages (something Lucas occasionally has trouble with), he just lets Mike get it out. None of the mood swings bother him unduly, beyond the fact that they bother *Mike*, which therefore bothers *him*. Mike can't help being a surly, mopey asshole sometimes. It's not pleasant, but it will wear off. Eventually. Hopefully. Until that happy day, Dustin can roll with it. He's adaptable.

One of the ways he's adapted is to never, ever bring up certain topics. In fact, he steers way the hell around certain topics. **Thou shalt not speak of Eleven** (unless you are first invited to do so) is one of the first commandments he came up with. A pretty obvious one, maybe, but the most important. It's certain to incite one of Mike's many moods, and none of them are pleasant. So unless Mike wants to talk about her, they just sort of pretend she doesn't exist. Or didn't exist. At least when Mike's in earshot. Unhealthy? Quite possibly. Necessary? Hell yes. Lucas finds it frustrating, but usually Dustin can kick him under the table or elbow him and Lucas will obediently shut up.

Dustin doesn't mind it, oddly. It's just so weird to talk about her, somehow. They only knew her for less than a week but everything revolved around her. Not in a selfish, arrogant kind of way but like a literal pivoting of important, life-changing, dangerous events. The kind that you don't really get over. You evolve. Or possibly you get therapy. But obviously Dustin prefers the adapting option. Dustin may only be a kid, but he still knows she changed him forever. And then she was just gone, as suddenly as she appeared, and you'd think it would be easy to get over that, given how little they really knew her and the shortness of that friendship. It should have been easy to

just forget about it and move on. Not that what happened to her wasn't a tragedy, but it shouldn't be their tragedy. You'd think that, but you'd be wrong.

So no, Dustin doesn't mind not talking about her. It doesn't mean he's forgotten her, although certain evil and powerful people would love for him to pretend otherwise. But he's also prepared for the day Mike does want to talk about her. He's not an idiot, he knows it would be better for Mike if he did. But he won't push it.

He doesn't mind that, but he does mind not being able to speak freely about other things. Normal, everyday things that occasionally carry some Eleven-related significance. Kind of like a germ. Like the Eggo thing. It's definitely not healthy to pretend certain things don't exist, just because Eleven liked them. Or because she didn't like them. Or even because she just like, fucking stood near them for a second.

Dustin doesn't like being censored. Not by his friends. He's used to it at school and it's probably for the best, because even he knows that sometimes he has trouble shutting his mouth, but friends are supposed to take you as you are. Not censor you. And suddenly there are millions of things Dustin can't say. Most of those things aren't important, but it's still frustrating.

Like yesterday in history.

Mike comes in a few minutes late because his bike has a flat. No big deal, he just leans over and asks Dustin what page they're on.

No big deal, except it actually is kind of a big deal, because they're on page 11. There's a picture of a guy, also bewigged (although this one is British) and *what the fuck was that all about?* Who decided that wigs were like, essential for living? Dustin realizes that Mike's still waiting for some kind of intelligible response and gives himself a mental shake. He opens his mouth, then closes it.

ELEVEN. Does that count? Is it enough to set him off? Dustin honestly has no idea, which pisses him off. Is it another unspoken rule? **Thou shalt not use the number 11**, under any circumstances? If that's the case, unfortunately their teacher didn't get that memo. Dustin stares at Mike's sweaty, flushed face and debates just holding out the book

until Mike can glean the page number for himself.

Jesus. It's just a fucking number. You can't pretend it doesn't exist.

The silence is expectant and stretching out into infinity and Dustin begins to wish that he also had a flat this morning.

"Hello?" Mike hisses.

"Hi."

Mike rolls his eyes. "What page are we on?"

"Around page 10, *you know*," he mutters finally, a little fed up because Mike made him flap, and damn it, he is supposed to be unflappable. "Guy in a wig." *Oh fuck. Thou shalt not have a wig? Talk about wigs? Lose your hair for whatever reason?* Thankfully, Mike doesn't react to the forbidden word, so it's probably not forbidden. Not yet. Not at this *current moment in their dimension*, but you never know with Mike these days. "Or you can skip directly to page 12. Whatever."

Mike gapes at him, like *he's* the weird one. Then he just opens his textbook to page 11 like the number has never had any significance to him whatsoever. Dustin's torn between relief and irritation. Mostly irritation. It occurs to him suddenly that maybe, just maybe, he's cracking up a little. It's becoming increasingly difficult to navigate around the emotional minefield that is masquerading as his friend.

Asshole.

He glares at Mike until Mike feels the weight of it and meets his gaze. Dustin hastily amends his expression into a more neutral one.

"Still coming over tonight?"

"Yep. I'll bring my best wig."

Dustin laughs, delighted. It's refreshing to hear Mike crack a joke but it also just delights him when his friends are like, on the same wavelength as him.

"What were they *thinking*?" Dustin asks, forgetting to use his inside voice. He doesn't t really have an inside voice, actually.

"*Right*?" Mike whispers, shaking his head in bewilderment. Dustin leans toward him, happy to continue the conversation that's a lot more scintillating than the chapter, especially since he's already *read* the chapter but an acid voice interrupts him.

"Mr. Henderson? Is the lesson disturbing you?"

Dustin smiles winningly. "No, ma'am. Well, the wig disturbs me, to be honest. Why *did* they wear wigs?" He's not trying to be annoying, he's honestly curious. It's important to indulge your curiosity, although not every teacher seems to believe this philosophy. But she's a *history* teacher, so who better to ask? "And where did they buy them? How much did they cost, like, given inflation today? Did they have different ones for different occasions? Like a party wig and a battle wig? How many wigs did people usually own, at any given time? Did they keep them in a special closet or something?"

He can hear her sigh even above the tittering of the class. She doesn't even bother responding, which Dustin thinks is pretty rude. He thinks the giggling is pretty rude, too. He wasn't trying to *amuse* them, for God's sake. He was trying to *educate himself*. In school. Which is the whole objective of school, isn't it? *Jesus*.

Mike's laughing, too, but it's a different kind of laughter. With him, not at him, so that's okay.

Battle wig? Mike mouths at him, before snickering again.

Okay, maybe Mike's laughing at him, too.

Whatever.

Mike's an asshole, but he can't help being an asshole. Dustin loves him, anyway. Most of the time. Dustin can be magnanimous about it, especially since Mike rarely laughs these days. Maybe he can lower his guard a little. Mike isn't as fragile as he's been treating him. He can handle an entire barrage of wig-related questions without even sulking once. He can look at the number 11 without closing his book

for the audacity of using the number. Dustin can relax.

Except that he actually can't, because he forgot one of the most important commandments. **Never relax thy guard**, because Mike is mercurial these days and what makes him laugh one second can enrage him the next. Which brings him back to the Eggo debacle.

"Want some juice?" Dustin (a more innocent and carefree Dustin) asks while ladling some room-temperature scrambled eggs onto a plate. His mom made breakfast before she left but they were still asleep. Oh well. Cold eggs are kind of disgusting, but he can crumble up the bacon on top of them and make them more palatable that way.

Is there anything bacon can't do?

There's an uneven number of bacon strips but Dustin's a benevolent host and he adds the extra one to Mike's plate.

He really regrets that fit of generosity now.

He slides the plate in front of Mike, a sleepy but happy Mike, and goes to get the juice. He's gone for only a few seconds but he sits down next to a stranger.

"Do you want to-"

But he doesn't get to finish the question because an Eggo smacks him in the face.

"Wha-?"

But he doesn't get to finish that, either, because now there's yelling and there's a plate on the floor and it appears to be raining eggs and bacon. Another eggo knocks his hat off and then he's shaking eggs out of his hair. He's being attacked with edibles, with nary a battle wig to protect him.

Before he can get his bearings, (assuming it's even possible to do so) the door slams and he's alone.

Well, except for Mews, who comes skidding into the room, tail puffing and back arching. He expresses his displeasure by hissing at

absolutely nothing.

"Tell me about it."

What the fuck?

Dustin's more shaken than he'd like to admit, because that level of vitriol from Mike (and over nothing! important! at all!) is a new and unpleasant thing. He doesn't know what to think, what to do, beyond cleaning up the mess and pretending he's unflappable. He picks up the overturned plate and sees a sad little shoe print of Eggo and egg embedded in the carpet beyond the safety of the linoleum.

Shit.

The orange juice is unscathed, and for that, he's grateful.

He's also grateful that Mews is on a diet and is very unhappy about about said diet because it means he can clean up the kitchen while Mews handles the more obvious chunks in the living room.

Dustin hears a car pull into the driveway before the engine cuts off. He swears, very quietly, and tugs at the rubber gloves. How to frame this little incident to his mom? Ideally without making Mike look like a nut-cake? He's still dismissing possible explanations when Mike opens the door, looking a little red around the eyes.

"Oh. Hello, *Michael*. You forgot to throw that, too." Dustin points at the glass of juice. "You want to finish up or should I knock it over for you?"

Mike sheepishly wheels in a vacuum cleaner. Dustin goggles at it.

"How did you get *that* over here?"

"Nancy drove me." He plugs it in and Mews races away from the evil noise machine before Mike can shoo him away from the mess.

They finish cleaning without speaking to each other, and Mike even mops the section of linoleum that's a little sticky from bacon grease. Dustin stows the gloves under the kitchen sink while Mike shoves the vacuum into the back seat of the car. Dustin watches Nancy back it

out of the driveway, sans Mike.

They sit on the couch in silence for a few minutes. Dustin's determined not to break it, but he's Dustin, and he can't help it. Silence is just so...silent.

"So."

"So."

"I'd offer you breakfast, *again*, but I'm not sure you're emotionally ready for that kind of commitment right now." Dustin says, a little archly. He's still pissed and can't help needling Mike, just a little.

Mike sighs. "I'm an asshole."

"I do seem to remember calling you that at some point recently."

"You didn't call me an asshole."

"I did in my head. Repeatedly. "

"Oh." Mike runs a hand through his already messy hair. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"No, I mean, really sorry. I don't know why I flipped out like that."

I do, Dustin thinks, but he remains tactfully silent.

Mike seems to find this silence encouraging, because he elaborates. "I'm kind of...a mess."

"I hadn't noticed."

Mike snorts with laughter, and Dustin hits him lightly on the shoulder. "I know you're a mess. You aren't the only one, just the... you know."

"Messiest?"

"Pretty much. Well, you might be tied with Will."

"I don't know what to do," Mike says, ignoring Dustin's attempt at humor which was, admittedly, a little lame. "How...not to be. Messy. I don't know what to do. To make it better."

It's a simple enough statement but the candor of it shocks Dustin, because it's the first time it's actually been said. The words kind of hang in the air. Dustin can almost see them. And he can see the naked fear on Mike's strained, too-old face. The last of his irritation evaporates.

"I don't think there's anything you can do," he says honestly.

Mike's eyebrows draw together in a frown. "Well, that's bleak."

"I didn't mean it to sound, like, terminal. I'm just saying that I think it's normal to be a little fucked-up right now."

"Yeah?"

"Well, yeah. I mean..." he trails off, uncertain what he can say and what he can't say. Mike brought up this topic but in an albeit abstract way so should he really proceed any further? Fuck it. Mike's waiting for a response, any response, and maybe it's something he needs to hear. Besides, fortune favors the brave.

"It's only been a couple of weeks. It's not something you just, like, get over. Maybe even ever. Not to sound bleak. But it's supposed to get easier, right? Just not overnight. I don't think you're supposed to rush it, or anything. Until then, you read your favorite book. Watch your favorite movie. Hang out with us. You just do whatever it is you need to do until it does get easier. I mean, I hope that doesn't involve any more food fights, but if it does, at least spare the bacon."

Mike laughs, and when he does, Dustin can feel his body relax slightly next to his own. He didn't realize how much tension he was holding until then.

"I think I can do that."

"Well, if you have to throw it, at least aim for my mouth."

"Will do."

There's another beat of silence, but Dustin doesn't feel the need to break it this time. It's a good silence, the kind you only experience when you're with your best friend. You don't have to fill that kind of silence with something inane just for the sake of it. You can both just exist in the same space. Dustin waits. He can feel Mike readying himself for something.

"I miss her."

"I know. I do, too."

Mike gives him a tiny, barely there smile, but it's something. It's still a smile. Dustin makes another mental note to himself to remember it, to remember it the next time he's irritated. To remind himself to be patient. It shouldn't be easy to forget, considering it's the most important commandment, but sometimes he needs an image to remind him.

Be there for your friend, because he's hurting and he needs you.

5. Day 27-Snow Ball, 1983

Snow Ball, 1983

It's kind of funny.

Not in the way that's actually funny, the humorous way. Mike certainly isn't laughing. He hasn't done much laughing since that night. None of them have, and even their teachers have noticed it. Mr. Clarke in particular has been concerned. He even told them he was only a phone call away if they ever needed to talk to someone. It was nice of him, but how can they ever take him up on it? Even his cantankerous history teacher has expressed a modicum of concern. So yeah, everyone has noticed. It would be problematic except they have the best excuse in the world. They've been worried about Will. And that's the truth, but it isn't the *whole* truth. Only a few people know any different.

Still, it is kind of funny.

Mike stands stock-still, allowing his mom to coo over him as she snaps a couple of Polaroids. She's gushing to no one in particular about how handsome he supposedly looks. How much he's growing up. How tall he's getting, *blah blah blah*, all of the classic motherly platitudes he endures whenever there's a special occasion or a holiday. Normally this kind of behavior would make him cringe (or leave the room entirely) but he doesn't mind. He's not even paying attention, just letting her words rush over him without making the slightest impact. He's preoccupied, thinking how *funny* it is.

It's funny that one day, one event, can induce so many conflicting feelings over time. A couple of months ago when the posters first appeared in the halls at school, he just ignored them. Didn't even really see them. He just tuned them out, like he's doing right now with his mom. It wasn't like he *hated* the idea. He just didn't *care* about it, one way or the other.

When the student council started selling tickets and they were reminded of it, again and again, during the morning announcements, it started becoming an annoyance. An object of ridicule, not just for

him but for most of the guys in his class. The annoyance grew as the girls became increasingly giggly whenever it was mentioned. Which was frequently. Most of the guys just wished it was already over. Dustin usually snickered at each poster on the way to class, and they were all in agreement. *None* of them were going. Why would they? Who would want to sit around watching other people dance? *Mike* sure as hell didn't want to dance. The idea had as much appeal as changing Holly's diapers. *No thanks*. Will pointed out that, based on everyone's current attitudes; there wasn't much likelihood of anyone actually *dancing*, anyway. And that somehow sounded even worse to Mike. A bunch of guys awkwardly avoiding eye contact with the girls they didn't (or *did*, but were too afraid to ask) want to dance with. Mike avoided bringing the subject up while within his mom's *bionic* hearing and decided to stay home. Maybe play D&D, if the others wanted to. That sounded like a lot more fun.

At least until last month.

Last month his feelings flip-flopped so rapidly it almost left him dizzy. Light-headed. And a little nauseous. But in a good way, somehow.

It didn't make any sense. He's had all of those symptoms before but they never felt, you know, *pleasant*. The opposite, in fact. It was like having the flu, if the flu also made you feel amazing at the same time. And the most worrying symptom?

He began seeing the *point* of the whole idea.

And the very worst part: he started to feel freaking *excited* about it. He even started *pitying* the other guys in his class, including his own friends, for not understanding. It wasn't about the stupid *dance*. The cookies and music and cheesy decorations. It was about the *girl*. The girl you could take to the dance, if you were lucky enough.

Over that week his feelings about the dance-and the girl-only intensified. As the week progressed and everything started turning to shit, the dance-or the *idea* of the dance-kept a talismanic hold over him. He told himself, over and over, that if they could just make it to the dance, everything would be okay. Things would go back to normal. *Better* than normal, because of her.

And she'd be safe.

No one would be looking for her. She'd be able to go to school with them. And he got more and more frantic during that week because a small part of him-the adult part of him-knew none of that was going to happen. He was being naïve. A stupid kid. He doesn't blame himself for that. Maybe that's part of what being a kid *means*. Being hopeful. Blindly optimistic. Trusting that things will always work out, because they *have* to. Because you're *you*, the hero of your own story, and you'll get that happy ending every time.

He doesn't feel that way anymore.

None of them do.

The events of last month have changed them all.

So yeah, it's pretty funny, in a fucked-up way.

Tonight is the Snow Ball. And he loathes the idea. The stupid cookies they'll serve, the lame decorations, the sappy music they'll play. He hates everything about it and he's not even there yet. He almost hates the kids that are still looking forward to it, those happy, hopeful kids. He hates them and envies them at the same time.

And he'd give anything-literally *anything*-to avoid it.

But he can't. His mom knows about it and in her own naïve way, she thinks it's just the thing to cheer him up. His scowls and dismal, pleading looks haven't been able to convince her otherwise. All of his friends are going, equally trapped by their own parents. The only one missing is the one that he actually cared about, at least in regards to the Snow Ball.

He tries not to think about it, but it's hard not to. It could be worse. At least his friends will be with him. That's something. He's riding with Lucas and Dustin. Will isn't riding with them, his mom will bring him. To his intense mortification, she's volunteered as a chaperone. Mike doesn't really blame her, and he knows Will doesn't, either. It's embarrassing but understandable. She's not ready to let him out of her eyesight. Not yet.

Even now, she hovers near their table, trying to be inconspicuous while also three feet away. None of them really mind. Dustin waves at her cheerily and invites her to sit down, but she takes one look at her son's pink face and declines.

Mike slouches in his chair and tries to survey the gym through the eyes of his previous self, the younger version of him that ridiculed the whole idea. It's pretty easy, because the music is just as bad as he imagined. And only a few people are dancing. Mostly it's just his classmates, awkwardly sitting in the gym under some shiny streamers. Dustin stocks up on cookies and punch, and then it's pretty much like their usual weekend hangout. Except they're at school instead of his basement.

And it isn't so bad.

Not really.

That's what he keeps telling himself, but he keeps one eye on the clock. It doesn't seem to be working, because they've only been here for ten minutes. *That can't be right.* He checks his watch, then Dustin's watch when Dustin and Lucas start playing hangman on the paper tablecloth. Will is watching them both, avoiding his mom's anxious eyes.

When he isn't willing the clock's hands forward, he's watching the door. He tries to be inconspicuous about it because he *knows* it's stupid, but he can't help it. She doesn't-*didn't*-even know the date of the Snow Ball. And even if she's okay, it's ridiculous to expect her to just walk through the door like nothing fucking happened.

But he can't help it.

And it passes the time, even though his guilt grows with every second. And that's stupid, too. But he *promised*. He promised her they'd go to the Snow Ball, right before it happened. And he could tell, even in that moment, that she knew better.

But it wasn't his fault.

Was it?

Maybe he could have stopped her from advancing on the Demogorgon, if he'd just gotten back up. But what would that have done? That wouldn't have changed anything. He couldn't have protected her. Even Lucas, with his wrist rocket, couldn't do anything. But... *he's* the one that chose to hide in a classroom instead of trying to escape.

And that would have changed *everything*.

Mike feels a prickling sensation and knows he's being watched. He meets Will's concerned eyes and forces a smile. Will doesn't return it, just looks at him with solemn eyes. It's nearly identical to *her* habitual expression, and it unnerves him.

"I'll be right back," he tells him, and pushes the chair back with a scrape before Will can say a word.

"Can you get some more cookies?" Lucas asks absently, attention focused on the game. He glances up with startled eyes when Will kicks him, none too gently, under the table. He glares at Will. "*Jesus*. What?"

Mike's already halfway across the gym. Lucas stares bewilderedly at his retreating back until something clicks. "*Oh*. Should we-?"

"No." Dustin doesn't raise his eyes from the game, although Will can tell he's no longer paying attention. His expression is grim. It looks so alien on that usually cheerful face that Will can't argue with it. He's right. "Give him a few minutes. He'll come back when he's ready."

He's not really supposed to be roaming the school, but he doesn't really care. The halls are dark and eerie. Too quiet. And that's almost funny, too. He's only seen them this empty, this dark, once before. It's something that would have been interesting a few months ago. Seeing the ordinary classrooms after-hours. They don't really look any different, but he would have found something almost magical in seeing them this way. A few months ago. Not now. Now they just look lonely, like they're waiting for something that hasn't happened yet. Something that may never happen.

Like him.

He walks without any idea of where he wants to go. He just lets his feet decide that for him and it doesn't take long. He's not really surprised when he ends up outside Mr. Clarke's room, the last place he saw her. The place she went from *friend* to *memory*.

And maybe he intended to come here all along. Subconsciously.

He must have, because why else would he have brought his supercomm? The guys usually take their backpacks everywhere, but not tonight. Not to a dance. He's the only one that brought his. He came prepared. And he kept an eye on the clock.

It's almost 7:40.

That's another funny thing, the time for his daily message to the unknown. He doesn't know why it became a habit, it just did. The first couple of nights he tried contacting her at that time, just because he'd finished his homework right beforehand. And then he just stuck with it. It seemed better, somehow. For a couple of reasons. The logical one being that if she's able to listen, somehow, it's better to stick with the same time every night. The other reason is irrational, but just as powerful. The numbers add up to something pretty special. Something vital.

He tries the doorknob and finds it unlocked, which is a little surprising after the damage to the school that night. Apparently they've decided any precautions against future calamities are unnecessary at this point. He takes it as a sign. He marvels at the new chalkboard, the pristine room. He's seen it five times a week for nearly a month, but it's still shocking in its tediousness.

You can't tell that anything extraordinary happened here.

He shakes off that thought before sitting cross-legged on the floor, roughly the spot where she stood that night. It's stupid but he doesn't give a shit. It's not based on anything logical. If she's in the Upside Down, she's not likely to be in the exact same spot after all this time. But it quiets his heart. And it helps him focus. Each time he communicates, he concentrates all of his mental force and directs it toward thoughts of her, trying to call her not only with his supercomm but also with his mind.

Just in case.

He turns to channel 11, because *Eleven* is all that matters to him these days.

"Hi, El. It's me. Mike. Are you there? Over."

He lets go of the button and waits for a few seconds, fixing on her face with his mind's eye. The trusting look that replaced the solemnity. At least whenever she looked at him. The grave look in her eyes, at the end.

Nothing happens.

It's disappointing but not a surprise.

"You've been gone for 27 days. I hope...I hope you're still okay. That you're out there, somewhere. And that you can hear me."

He doesn't know if she's listening. If she *can* listen. He's grown up enough in the past month to know the answer is *probably not*. But he's still a kid. Still capable of hope, even if it's a lackluster version these days. And if he ever has a hope of making contact, surely it will be tonight.

This spot.

This night.

At the Snow Ball.

It's Eleven's first night in Hopper's cabin. She's happier than she's been in a long time, because she's full. Not full of Eggos. He doesn't have any Eggos. He gave her *TV Dinners*, even though they weren't watching the TV while they ate. Eleven ate two of the dinners, and part of Hopper's when he pushed it toward her across the table. She's warm and dry and full, and for now, that's almost enough. It's much, much better than being outside. Outside, where she began wondering if it wasn't better to be in the lab. At least in the lab, she wasn't cold.

When Hopper says he can't stay, she looks at him without speaking. She feels a confusing mixture of emotions that she's getting used to.

Emotions are *always* confusing, because there are *so many* of them, and you can feel them all at once. Disappointment and sadness, because she's been alone for a long time, and she's lonely. It's not a new feeling, though. She's known that feeling for a long time. And relief, because while she's grateful for Hopper, she doesn't *know* him. Not yet. She still feels a little wary of him, even though he's been leaving her food and trying to help her. And now that she's here, things will be different. She sense she won't be alone very much in the future, and she needs to get used to that, too.

But she *is* lonely.

Hopper seems to realize this, because he tosses her a package of cookies and sits down at the tiny table with her.

"I'll be back tomorrow, before work. I don't like leaving you alone out here but I've got to get some stuff from the house, some supplies for us. And then I'll stay here with you, okay?" It's the truth, but not the whole truth. He-*they*-need supplies, but that's not the real issue. He doesn't know if he's being watched. He needs to check his house again for bugs. He needs to come up with a plan, and quickly.

She nods.

Hopper's not used to her unnerving silences yet. He glances around the kitchen, at the remains of their dinner. She ate wolfishly, greedily. She might get hungry again, but he knows she won't know how to work the stove. Or even a microwave, probably.

"If you get hungry, there are some snacks in the cabinet, okay?" He points. "And water in the fridge." He doesn't offer her a soda, because he doesn't have any here. He grabbed what supplies he could, but they're going to need a lot more.

"Okay." She starts to ask him a question. She's sure he'll know the answer, and she's been very curious about it for a long time. She doesn't get a chance, though, because he starts talking and it makes her forget the question.

"I'll show you how to work the TV, all right? This is the remote." He holds it up for her. "You can change the channels and volume with

these."

She gives him a tiny smile, and shakes her head.

"No? It's easy, look, if I press this-"and he does-"it changes the channel. You try it." He hands it to her, and she takes it willingly enough before dropping it on the couch. She slides her gaze to the TV and furrows her brow. The channel changes to the news, then to a movie. Hopper's not a movie buff but even he recognizes Indiana Jones.

He looks back at the girl in astonishment. She's still giving him a tiny, almost hopeful smile. It's almost imperceptible but it's *there*. It's a start. He grins at her and the smile widens. "Well. I guess that will work. Saves on batteries, anyway."

She doesn't understand that one, he can tell, but he doesn't have time to explain. Not tonight. "Are you...okay with me leaving? It's just for tonight."

She nods, but that could mean anything since she's still watching him inscrutably.

"Okay. Here, I wrote down my number, okay? If you have a problem, if something happens, you use the phone right there and dial this number. And don't go outside, or open the door for anyone."

"You?"

"Well, yeah, but I have a key. I'll knock like this first, so I don't scare you, okay?" He knocks against the wall to illustrate. Makes a mental note to buy some more locks. A *plethora* of locks. Just in case.

Eleven nods again. For someone who says he's in a hurry, he's not in much of a hurry, she thinks. But she's wrong. Apparently he's finished for the night. He makes her promise to lock the door, and she locks it immediately when he leaves. She takes her promises very seriously.

And then she's alone. And she's used to that. It's okay.

She isn't tired yet so she doesn't want to go to bed. And there isn't much else to do, except watch TV until she falls asleep. She needs to

change the channel because it's just grey and white and black and noisy now. Not a *movie*, she's pretty sure about that. But she doesn't bother, because she realizes something. She realizes she never asked him the question. She'll have to wait until tomorrow. She supposes one day won't hurt, although it's important.

She wants to know if Will is safe.

She knows the others are safe, because she's stayed away from them.

But she doesn't know about Will. The last time she saw him, he was in the Upside Down. And the monster was after him. She killed the monster, but she wants confirmation that Hopper and Joyce rescued him. She thinks they did, she thinks he's okay, but she's not *sure*. And she can't *see* him, because she doesn't have the bath. It was a lot of work to make the bath, that night, and she doesn't have any *supplies*. And it's a lot harder to find someone, to see someone, without the bath. She was able to hear Will before, over Mike's supercomm and the radio in the school, but not *see* him. And even using the radio was hard.

But she was very tired then.

And she's more powerful now.

Eleven gives the mental equivalent of a shrug. It won't hurt to *try*. Although she doesn't have a radio. She glances up at the TV curiously. Maybe that will work instead? She only needs a way to channel her energy into something else. Maybe it's better? Maybe instead of just hearing him, she'll *see* him. On the TV.

She closes her eyes and concentrates on Will. Will, who is almost her friend. Who will be her friend someday. She waits for what seems like minutes, but it doesn't work. The change doesn't happen. She cracks one eye open to check but the TV is still white and grey and black and noisy.

Eleven sighs and almost gives up. *Almost*. She found him before, she can find him again.

Maybe it needs to be more like the bath. She needs to block

everything out, except her mind and the TV. She stands up and grabs her blanket off her new bed and settles back onto the couch. She presses the blanket over her eyes, concentrating again. But it's no good. She can still see the lights, even through the blanket. She gives a tiny huff of irritation and turns them off with her mind, to help the illusion. She isn't in Hopper's cabin, she tells herself. She's in the bath. It's dark. Quiet. There's nothing except for herself, and the person she needs to find.

Will.

And something happens.

Not the thing she expected. Not Will on the TV. Instead the crackly sound from the TV dims, fades away to almost nothing.

She hears a voice. It sounds almost like a whisper, like it's very far away.

"He's been gone for a long time," the voice says. It sounds worried. It doesn't sound familiar, not with her *ears*, because she hasn't heard it much. But it's familiar somewhere else. In her mind. Her heart. *Somewhere* inside, anyway. She focuses on the voice and tries to make it louder. She imagines a button, the one Hopper showed her, for turning up the TV. She tries to pull the voice closer to her, to hear it better. To *see* the owner of the voice.

She senses the voice is listening to someone else, but she can't quite make out the words. And the other voice is just a distraction. She blocks it out and a shape immediately begins to form. She smiles. He's blurry, like looking at something with your eyes almost closed, but she can still see him. *And he's okay*, not in the Upside Down. She knows this because he's with...

But she misses that part. The figure retreats, diminishes. She's being pulled away from him, tugged somewhere else. It's like someone pulling on her hand to lead her into another room. That happens sometimes, when the connection is weak and breaks. But the connection *doesn't* break, it just *changes*.

There's another voice. It's loud, so loud it's like the voice is right next

to her. It's unexpected and it startles her. She jumps a little. She thinks *that* will break the connection, but it doesn't, which startles her even more. The most startling thing of all is that *she* didn't seek out this new connection. She is being *sought*. It's never happened before, but she knows it when she feels it.

It unnerves her.

She struggles to break the connection herself, but she's held fast. The way she held the Demogorgon still with her power. She was able to do that, because she was more powerful than the Demogorgon. She's powerless right now.

And that has never, ever happened before.

She's *always* been able to break the connection, if she wanted. Even when she met the Demogorgon in her mind. And *she* made the connection that time.

What's happening?

Her heart is pounding and her mouth has the fear taste. She struggles harder against the voice, trying to rip herself out of its grip. She tries to open her eyes, or lower the blanket, but she's no longer in Hopper's cabin. She's in her mind, and she can't do anything but try to fight. She struggles so hard she nearly misses the words.

"You've been gone for 27 days."

That stills her, because she *knows* that voice. And her heart nearly breaks in gladness and wonder. She doesn't know how he's made the connection, but he *has*. Somehow.

"I hope...I hope you're still okay. That you're out there, somewhere. And that you can hear me."

I'm here. I hear you.

But she knows the words are lost. She's not the one that made this connection, and she can't communicate. She tries to focus on him, to make her own link, but it's hard. His face forms before her eyes and that's enough. *She can see him*. Why can't he see her? When she's

made a connection, she can always see. But it's clear that he can't. His expression doesn't change. It's perplexing but she'll think about that later. And now she knows he's looking for her. She can try to forge her own link, later.

"I'm at the school. In Mr. Clarke's class. Where-where you disappeared. Tonight is the Snow Ball. Remember, I told you about that? It's a dance in the gym. The guys are there. I wanted to call you, since it's 7:40. And...it just seemed, I don't know, *right*. To call you from here this time. I guess...kind of like I'm keeping my promise. Remember? I promised we could go to the Snow Ball together."

She remembers. And it's tempting, very tempting, to make her way to the school right now. But she can't. Hopper told her not to leave.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't keep my promise."

But *he* didn't break the promise. *She* did. And she tries to tell him that, but she can see from his downcast eyes that those words are lost, too.

"But it's not that great. The Snow Ball, I mean. Well, it would have been, if you were here. It's just kind of...boring. But Will's here, and his mom. He's doing okay. He's still a lot more quiet than usual, but he's doing better. Dustin and Lucas are here. They were playing a game when I left."

She isn't with him, and she should be. But in a way, she is. They're connected right now, and he's at the dance. Part of her is there, too. It makes her feel a little better about breaking the promise. She tries to imagine what the dance is like. She doesn't really know what dancing is, but she knows it's something special. It must be, because Mike wanted to dance with her.

"The gym looks a lot different from the night you were there. They've decorated it-streamers and balloons and stuff. It looks pretty nice. I mean, as nice as the gym can ever look. Most of the school is here, just hanging out. Only a few were dancing when I left. I guess it would have been weird to dance, if no one else really was, but...I think it would have been fun, you know? I really wish you were here."

Mike. I am here.

And it's true.

Almost.

She's sitting right in front of him on the floor of the classroom...but only in her mind.

Mike. I'm here.

She sends the thought again, with enough force to make her nose gush fresh blood. The supercomm jerks in Mike's hand and his eyes widen in shock. Even his mouth widens in shock, like he's been electrocuted. *Because he felt something.*

He heard something.

Eleven sees his reaction and her heart leaps in hope. She sends the thought again, watching him anxiously.

"What?" He asks blankly, stupidly. He forgets to press the button, but it doesn't matter. Because the voice-the feeling-didn't come from his supercomm. It came from somewhere else. Right in front of him. And nowhere. *Everywhere.* "What?"

He jumps again when an irritated voice emanates from the doorway. The connection, now tenuous, breaks completely. The feeling-if there was a feeling-is gone. He looks up at his friend, mouth still agape.

"I said, Mike, are you in here?" Dustin repeats, staring at him curiously. "What are you doing on the floor?"

Mike slumps forward, exhaling in a rush. Even though Dustin has no idea what he was trying to do, he's embarrassed. Especially since he actually thought he'd made contact. He feels himself turning pink.

"Nothing," he mutters, shoving his supercomm back into his backpack. He stands up slowly. His legs have fallen asleep, because they're tingling. He doesn't think about the fact that the sensation isn't just located in his *legs*. "I'm not doing anything."

Eleven's eyes open and the blanket falls from her nerveless fingers onto her lap. She feels that odd mixture of emotions again. Disappointment. Frustration. An aching sadness.

But she also feels happiness. And hope. Those two emotions are tied together, and they're stronger than the other feelings.

What can be done once can be done again. And she's armed with new information.

I wanted to call you, since it's 7:40.

She can guess that that means. It's easy to guess, considering what he said right after.

...to call you from here this time.

This time.

Eleven feels so many feelings, they make her dizzy. Slightly nauseous. Light-headed. Like when she uses too much of her power. But in a good way. An *amazing* way.

She saw him.

She heard his voice.

They were at the Snow Ball together. In a way. A very *strange* way, but in Eleven's opinion, it still counts. They were *together*.

Just like they promised.

6. Day 35-Lando

A/N: This chapter takes place a week after the dance. As with the previous chapter, I'll upload it out of order so you guys can find it easily.

A huge thank you to my new betas! AliKattt, H E Larkin and Pennsylvania Jones, you guys are awesome. How did I write anything without your help?

Lando

He's drawn to Hopper, and he doesn't know why. He can't explain it, not even to himself. He doesn't have the words to even try. He only understands the feeling.

It's the feeling you might get before a storm, or if you stand too close to a powerline. An *electrical* feeling, the kind of thing that makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck.

It's a constant sensation of *déjà vu*, the feeling that he's lived this moment before, and it's somehow important. And Hopper holds the key.

It's a completely irrational feeling, but it's impossible to ignore. It's like with his compass last year, when they were trying to find the gate by following it north. Except that this time, *he's* the compass.

He has a thousand analogies for it but no answers. He only knows that it's getting stronger every day.

He tries bringing it up to his friends, but they aren't exactly helpful. Although they try. They listen to him attentively after lunch. Dustin even pushes his comic aside while he speaks. A long silence falls and Mike allows himself to feel hopeful. Maybe they'll be able to figure it out, the entire party. He hopes. Although he isn't *too* surprised when Dustin's serious expression evaporates and he collapses into mirth.

"So...what you're saying is, Hopper gives you a tingly feeling?"

Mike glares at him and Dustin holds up his hands placatingly. "*You're*

the one that said it, not *me*."

"I didn't mean it like that. Asshole."

Lucas makes a heroic effort to keep his face as somber as possible, because Mike looks seriously pissed. And worried. Dustin accepts the rebuke silently, leaning back in his chair to mull it over. "Well, it's definitely *weird*, I'll grant you that."

"No shit."

"What do you think it *means*?"

Mike gives him an exasperated look. "If I knew *that*, I wouldn't be asking you guys."

"Touché."

Will taps his fork against the table. He's taking it more seriously than the other guys, but that's to be expected. He's always been the thoughtful one. Mike's glad he's here, and his consideration of the issue at hand is only a minor factor in that feeling. Will's only been home for about a couple of weeks, and only after a lot of pleading. Mike half-expected the government doctors to keep him locked up for years.

Like they did with Eleven.

Will glances up, brow furrowed, and catches Mike's eyes.

"When did these...feelings start?" Will asks, feeling a little ridiculous, because the question is familiar. He can't help feeling a *tiny* bit like one of his many new doctors. He kicks Dustin under the table, just in case.

Mike thinks it over, because it's a good question. The boys (sans Will) have all hounded Hopper for more information on Eleven since her disappearance, but he didn't have that weird feeling then. The magnet feeling.

"Just recently. After the dance."

"Do you think Hopper knows something?" Lucas asks curiously.

"I think Hopper probably knows *a lot* of things. They did make him chief for a reason," Dustin jokes, before considering it further. "Probably."

"I always kind of thought they just drew his name out of a hat," Lucas responds, abandoning Mike's problem without further ado. He can't help himself, because it sounds crazy. He makes eye contact with Dustin and they both laugh.

"Guys," Will says warningly. He's protective of Hopper, because he has to be. He knows what he owes Hopper. Hopper listened to his mom, and helped her, even at the risk of his own life. Hopper found him in the Upside Down, and saved him.

"Sorry, sorry," Dustin chants, holding up his hands in apology again. "We *know* Hopper's a bad-ass. It's just, you know, a *little* hard to reconcile this latest Hopper with the..." He trails off, searching for a tactful way to finish the sentence.

"Town drunk version?" Lucas asks, because he doesn't give a shit about being tactful. Dustin tries for a reproving look but fails. He snickers again instead.

Mike isn't listening, he's still thinking about Lucas's question. When he speaks, he neatly brings the discussion back under control, and without even being aware of it. "I...I'm not sure. I think if anyone *did*, it would be him."

"Huh?" Lucas has forgotten the original question.

"If anyone knows something. Besides the lab guys, I mean."

Lucas scratches his arm, considering this. "That makes sense. They're both government. *And* Hopper's law enforcement. Maybe he got an extra debriefing that we weren't exactly party to," he says, glowering. He's still pissed about the numerous NDAs they've all signed. What's the point of experiencing something supernatural, something that would redefine science, if you can't even talk about it?

"I don't know about that. Why would they tell him anything? He's just

a local cop. I don't think they'd trust him with any important intel. Plus, they know he would just tell us all, anyway," Will says.

"Would he?" Lucas asks, glancing at Dustin.

"Yeah. Of course. We already know, like, a lot of stuff we shouldn't. He trusts us. And he'd never keep anything about her a secret. Not from *us*."

Lucas is still skeptical. "We're a bunch of kids."

"We're-well, *you* guys-are the same bunch of kids that figured out where the gate was, and about the Upside Down. The adults would never have put everything together without you guys. *And* you found Eleven. Hopper knows he can trust us. I mean, you guys saw her kill a monster with her powers, and you haven't exactly been blabbing it all over town." Will glances at Mike, just in case. He's broken a couple of unspoken rules. He's mentioned Eleven, *by name*, *and* he's brought up the night she disappeared. Either one of those subjects brought up by someone other than Mike can cause him to leave a room, but this time he only looks somber.

Dustin hates the unspoken rules, not just because they're about as inclusive as the Ten Commandments, but also because it's just not who they are. Who they *were*. They've never kept secrets from each other, and they've always been able to talk about anything. *Everything*.

Lucas glances at him and gives him a tiny, almost imperceptible shrug. They both avoid making eye contact with Mike, just in case Will's set him off again. Dustin isn't the only one who hates the new rules, but they've been a little more willing to follow them since the night of the dance, which ended spectacularly. If *spectacularly* refers to Mike snapping at all of them like a rabid dog, anyway. Not to mention storming out and insisting he'd rather walk home about five seconds after rejoining them in the gym.

But Mike just nods, and there's a beat of silence. It seems like they're safe. This time, at least. Dustin decides that if Will can bring up the subject that is normally taboo, Mike won't kill him for continuing it. "About that night..."he begins delicately.

Will and Mike both wait for him to continue, but Lucas rolls his eyes.
"Don't even say it."

"What?" Dustin asks, injured.

"We all know what you're going to say."

"You do not."

"Um, yeah. We do. It would only be about the billionth time."

"Well? Don't you think it's *suspicious*?" Dustin snaps, glaring at him.

"Yes, as I've already fucking *told* you. Numerous times."

Will slumps in his chair. They've gone over and over this theory, arguing about Hopper's loyalty even when he was in the hospital. Will's opinion hasn't changed and he's sick of the subject.

"Well, how did they find us?" Dustin asks them all, over Lucas's audible groans. "No, seriously. Who knew we were there that night?"

"You guys," Will mutters unenthusiastically. He hates to encourage Dustin, but he knows it won't make a difference, anyway. "Nancy. Jonathan. My mom. Hopper."

"Okay. Yeah. And *you're* obviously ruled out, because you were unconscious. And in another dimension."

"Thanks."

Dustin ignores the sarcasm. "And it wasn't *me*, and it wasn't Lucas, even though you *did* have a problem with her."

"Hey!"

"Well, you did. At first. Anyway, it wasn't Mike for obvious reasons. So that leaves your mom, Nancy, Jonathan and Hopper. And your mom basically fell in love with El-*her*, and you probably would have had a little sister if things had worked out differently. Or a big sister," he amends, since they don't actually know how old Eleven is. Was. "Whatever. And Jonathan's obviously out, and Nancy, because they

were busy with the Demogorgon. That just leaves Hopper."

"Hopper wouldn't do that." And Will suddenly sounds fierce.

"Just hear me out. Okay, so he's got the *means*, because he and your mom were in the lab that night, before they found you. *And* they were separated. Your mom says they just handcuffed her for awhile, but who knows what happened with Hopper? Maybe they threatened him or something. Or he folded anyway. He didn't know *El-her*. Maybe he thought it was for the best, that she was dangerous." Dustin feels the weight of Will's glare and elaborates hastily. "Not because he's an asshole, or anything, but maybe they gave him some bullshit story and he fell for it. Or he made a mistake. It makes sense."

"You need a motive," Will says, quoting his favorite detective stories and pretending his fork is a pipe. He puffs on it thoughtfully, and the laughter of his friends breaks the tension. Momentarily, anyway.

"I just gave you, like three possible motives," Dustin says, still laughing. "But forget the fucking motive, okay? That part doesn't matter. Someone sold us out, I'd be willing to bet, like, all of my comics on it."

"All of them?" Lucas asks, impressed.

"Well, no. It took me forever to build my collection. I'd wager half," Dustin amends, suddenly sounding like a game show contestant. Lucas smirks at him.

Mike's been silent for most of the conversation. He finally speaks up. If Dustin hopes their leader will back him up, he's in for a disappointment. Instead, Mike exonerates Hopper. "I agree with Will. Hopper wouldn't do that. He's not like, a barrel of laughs or anything, but he's a cop. His job is to protect people. To help them. Think of everything he went through to help Will. He could have been killed, but it was his job. And the right thing to do. Hopper wouldn't knowingly endanger a kid, even one with supernatural powers. And he wouldn't trade a life for a life." Mike is certain of this. The idea goes against every book or movie he's seen or read featuring a small-time cop. They're gruff, they may be assholes, but they step up and do the right thing. Every time. "He's a hero. Kind of a dick, but a

hero."

"Like Han," Will says, hoping a *Star Wars* reference will distract Dustin. Mike smiles at him but Lucas shakes his head warningly because *please, no*. He's sick of hearing it. *Don't say it*.

He doesn't, but he isn't quite ready to throw in the towel, either. "Then how did they find us?"

"A lucky guess, maybe. We weren't at any of our houses, and Hawkins isn't exactly a big city. There were only so many places we could go. We don't know how many places they checked. Maybe they combed over the whole town first."

That doesn't make any sense to Dustin and he rolls his eyes. When they were *combing the town*, they only sent out a few guys. The ones Hopper dealt with in the junkyard. When they showed up at the school, they were an army. A fully loaded, heavily weaponized, very scary army. Even their freaking *boss* came.

Mike seems to read the argument in his eyes, and he nods wearily. "I know, but we don't know everything about Eleven, what they did to her. Maybe they were able to track her somehow. They found us at my house, didn't they? And Hopper didn't have a *clue* she was there. And at the junkyard. Yes, I know we told Hopper where we were," he adds, before Dustin can say anything. "But that just proves my point. If he sold us out, why not do it *then*? I think it's more likely they were able to track her somehow."

"Well, that doesn't exactly disprove my theory. Maybe he wanted to help us, but then he was freaked out when he knew what she could do with her power, and they talked him into selling us out somehow. Either way, my theory makes a lot more sense than yours."

"How so?"

Lucas speaks up for his friend. "Well, in *his* theory, Hopper knows more than he's telling. And that fits in with whatever weird feeling you've been having about him. If *you're* right, then why's your spider-sense tingling? That doesn't make any sense."

Dustin decides that now is not the time to debate Marvel versus DC. He makes a mental note to bring it up in the future, however.

Mike sighs. "I still don't think Hopper would do that. Not after what he went through to save Will. But that doesn't mean that he doesn't know something now. Not like, *everything*, but more than we do. He might have confirmation she's in the Upside Down. He's been in the lab with you and your mom, right?" Mike turns to Will, who nods reluctantly.

"He would have asked them about her. And maybe they told him."

"Again, *my* theory makes more sense. Why would they tell him *anything*, unless he was working for them somehow? In your premise, he's just a small-town cop. They wouldn't tell him any more than they had to, even if he was annoying the shit out of them with questions."

Mike doesn't argue, because there isn't any point. They've had this debate before, and no one ends up convincing anyone else. And he can't deny that Dustin defends his opinion skillfully. He still doesn't think Hopper is in on some nefarious plot against them, but *knowing* is one thing. *Feeling* is something else entirely. And no matter what he *knows*, he's still drawn to Hopper. And he's only felt like that recently. If Hopper had betrayed them, wouldn't he have been feeling it all along?

He doesn't know, but the feeling doesn't subside. Mike spends the rest of the weekend riding his bike near Hopper's house, and at the station. When Hopper sees him (which he does, frequently) he only gives an irritable wave. This sort of semi-stalking isn't exactly new, and it doesn't seem to really bother Hopper. Not more than usual, anyway. The guys have done their fair share of it since she went missing, partly to hound him for any leads. And partly to hound him for more information on her life before they met her, in case *that* information yielded any leads. Maybe it was naïve of them, hoping he'd be able to find her if they couldn't. He couldn't even find Will, technically. *Eleven* did.

When he runs into him (very nearly literally) at the grocery store on Sunday, it isn't because of this pseudostalking, however. He's actually as surprised as Hopper. He's only wasting his Sunday here because his

mom wouldn't leave him alone. She's been worried that he's "in a funk" lately. She doesn't know exactly what happened, but she knows he lost a friend. She's been giving him extra-motherly glances lately and trying to bond with him at every opportunity. Which is why he's spending his precious Sunday afternoon debating the most edible color for the perfect banana with his mom.

It's mind-numbingly boring, and he's almost relieved when they crash into Hopper. For a few seconds. Then he just tunes them both out as they make inane, polite adult conversation. The kind of conversation that seems to happen when *neither* one of the parties actually wants to chat, but is inescapable when you're both shopping for bananas at the same time. Since his mom is otherwise occupied, he quickly gathers up the produce from her list and heaves it into the cart. At least it will shave a few minutes off this latest trip into hell. As he maneuvers around Hopper's cart to grab a handful of oranges, he glances in without really seeing anything, with a complete lack of curiosity.

And then his mind replays what his eyes already know. His head snaps back toward the cart in surprise, hand still outstretched toward the oranges.

He's bumped into Hopper like this before, probably dozens of times. It's just a part of small-town life. You run into pretty much everyone you've ever met whenever you leave the house. And Hopper usually buys beer. *A lot* of beer. And chips. TV dinners and fried chicken. The stereotypical bachelor fare, in other words. He's never seen anything remotely green in Hopper's cart before, unless cookies on St. Patrick's Day count. So this is definitely worth a second glance.

Hopper's buying fruit.

And vegetables.

Meat that actually has to be cooked, by someone, *outside* of the store.

It's weird.

Very weird, almost like Hopper's been replaced by a particularly health-conscious alien. True, the cart also contains half a dozen TV

dinners (even the pictures look revolting), but it's definitely a deviation from anything approaching normal for Hopper.

And there isn't any beer.

That one pertinent fact causes him to gape, and Hopper notices. He laughs, and the sound shocks Mike more than the contents of his cart. It's in some other realm *beyond* weird. Hopper never laughs. Hopper curses and grunts and snaps. And that's pretty much his entire repertoire. Even in polite, adult conversation, he usually comes off like an asshole, albeit a *polite* asshole.

"I'm on a diet," Hopper tells him, since Mike is still gawping rudely at his groceries. Karen gives him a glare that's usually intimidating before saying something encouraging to Hopper, but Mike isn't listening.

He's fixated on something else in the cart, almost hidden by a bag of apples. It's not anything exotic, not anything that would raise anyone's eyebrows in a small town. Or in a big city, actually. It's a completely ordinary, completely American staple, but it still causes a prickling sensation on the back of his neck. The feeling is suddenly overwhelming. The electrical feeling. The magnet feeling.

He says goodbye absently when his mom gives her watch an exaggerated *oh look at the time* glance and Hopper waves, rolling his cart away from them. His mind is otherwise occupied. And despite his earlier defense of him, he still ditches his mom in the cereal aisle and zeroes in on Hopper before he can leave.

"Oh. Hey," Hopper grunts, barely looking at him as he grabs a package of paper towels. Apparently it's okay to ignore someone and dispense with the bullshit chitchat if that person is under the age of 30. Mike doesn't respond. Hopper feels the weight of his gaze and finally makes eye contact, eyebrows raised. Mike is staring at him expectantly. Hopper's eyebrows travel even further north. "I don't have telepathic powers, kid."

Mike doesn't even blink. It's actually unsettling, somehow, so he reiterates, "I can't read your mind. What do you want?"

It's as good of a segue as Mike can hope for, actually. He still doesn't speak, but he turns his attention back to Hopper's cart in answer. Hopper follows his gaze, staring blankly at his provisions.

Just groceries.

He glances back at Mike, but no help is forthcoming. And he doesn't speak kid. Maybe he used to, and maybe he will again someday, but for now it's a lost language. He contemplates his groceries again. Oranges. Some bananas. Apples. Hopper's gaze catches on the box underneath the apples.

Oh.

Shit.

He leans over and excavates the box of Eggos, holding it up to show that he understands. Mike looks back at him coolly. Hopper refuses to admit, even to himself, that he's intimidated by scrawny Mike Wheeler.

"She's not the only person in the world that likes them," he says, as gently as possible. Gentleness doesn't come to him naturally, but he's working on it. And it silences the guilt, although it may seem more suspicious. More out of character. He tries again. "I'm not hiding her in my coat," he adds, spreading his coat wide, a little sardonically.

But that doesn't work, either. It comes out a little gruffer than he intends. Mike's face sort of *crumples*, and the twinge of guilt grows. But only a little. He's doing the right thing, the only thing. He's doing the best he can. For everyone involved. He repeats the mantra to himself a couple of times until he believes it completely. And maybe it *would* be for the best, this necessary lie, if it were anyone but Mike Wheeler standing in front of him.

"I know," Mike mutters, turning a little pink with mortification. *What the hell is wrong with him?* And what did he *think*, that Hopper's been delivering them to the lab? Or throwing them through the gate, just in case she's a little hungry on the other side?

But...

Stop it. Jesus.

Hopper's right. *Everyone* eats Eggos. He has them at least three times a week. It's not like they're a rare delicacy or anything. He starts to apologize, but Hopper waves him off.

"It's okay, kid. Don't worry about it."

But he does worry about it.

He can't help it.

That weird feeling just keeps growing, the one that tells him *Hopper knows*.

Knows what?

Something. Something about *her*.

Something he wants, *needs* to know.

But it's such an irrational feeling. It's ridiculous. So he ignores it. Tries to, anyway, as he watches Hopper's retreating back. It's surprisingly hard, resisting the urge to run down the aisle before he's out of sight. To just fucking *grab* him. Demand answers. To *shake him* if he has to, until he gets what he needs. The violent urge is surprising, frightening. But he *needs* to know. He needs an explanation for the magnet feeling.

Stop him. He knows.

The words replay in his mind, like a refrain. *Stop him. He knows. Stop him. He knows. Stop him. He knows.*

But he doesn't know *anything*, he isn't privy to some top-secret government information. He knows exactly what Mike knows: she's gone. And that's it.

Mike finally tears his gaze away from Hopper. He fights every instinct and tries to silence the refrain with more logical, rational matters. His mom. He's been gone for awhile. His mom will be wondering where the hell he went. He grabs a couple of bags of chips as he glances

down each aisle for her. That feeling (*stop him he knows*) doesn't lessen as he moves further away from Hopper. But it does get easier to ignore. *Hopper doesn't know anything.*

Hopper knows everything.

It gives him a constant feeling of guilt, but he can deal with it. He can ignore it. It gets easier every day, now that he has a chance to make it right. He sold her out after approximately five minutes, that's true. He felt like shit about it but he did it, anyway. Telling himself it was for the greater good. And for Will.

It was easy.

It made him feel like shit, but it was horribly easy. Joyce and her kids think he's a hero. He knows better, because he knows what they don't.

He weighed both of them, Eleven and Will, against each other.

And he didn't hesitate.

Will was-is- a town kid. *Joyce's* kid. *His* responsibility, because he has an obligation to this town.

Will. Against Eleven.

A kid he didn't know, a kid with a terrifying power. One that opened a gate into another dimension, unleashed a monster, without even blinking. He didn't-and doesn't-hold that against her, but it did factor into his decision. Even though he could tell, after only one meeting, that she was also a sweet kid. An innocent victim. A kid that he wanted to keep safe.

But he couldn't.

He had to make a choice.

And he made it.

And if he could do it all over again, he would do it exactly the same way.

It doesn't make him an asshole. *More* of an asshole, anyway. He hopes. He knew a little of her power, and knew she could take care of herself.

Will couldn't.

In the end, it didn't come down to choosing Will over Eleven, it came down to protecting a helpless kid instead of the one capable of defending herself.

He thought-honestly believed-she could protect herself and the others when they came for her.

He tells himself he wouldn't have made the same call otherwise, because it helps with the guilt.

And he was half-right. She protected her friends. He just didn't factor in the monster. The fact that she couldn't protect her friends and herself at the same time. He could barely live with the guilt after that, at least not without drinking heavily.

But then everything changed.

Two weeks ago, a hunter reported being knocked unconscious by the "Russian" girl. He wanted to report the theft of his coat, but mostly he wanted to add fuel to the gossip fire. Hopper half-dismissed his claim, but immediately left food in the woods *just in case*. If nothing else, it eased the guilt.

Last week, everything changed again.

And no, he's not hiding her in his coat pocket.

But he *is* hiding her.

She doesn't exactly trust him yet, not completely. Maybe just because he's an adult. Or a person in authority. But she's getting there, and he's glad for it. He can live with the guilt, the guilt for what she doesn't know. He knows if she ever finds out the truth, she'll kill him. Not just for that night.

Hopper has two lies.

One proves Dustin correct. He *is* a traitor.

The other secret is no less damning. She asked him, the day after she came home with him, when she could talk to her friends. When she could see them. See *him*.

Soon.

That was a lie, and he knew it even then. It's not safe for her or for the kids if she shows up at one of their houses. It may be years before it's safe. Or even longer. She has a dangerous power, and Hopper knows they won't give up looking for her. She's too precious to them.

So yeah, he knows. She would kill him for either lie, and if *she* didn't, Wheeler would. And it does make him feel guilty, although he can live with it. He can live with anything, as long as it keeps her safe. Her safety has become paramount to him, and yeah, he's a smart guy. He doesn't miss the irony of the situation. He's the one that put her in danger in the first place. He's the reason she can't be with Mike, with the rest of her friends.

But he can live with it. He can make amends. She's a great kid, and he's getting attached. More than he ever expected. He's nearly quit drinking completely, without any conscious decision. He's eating healthier, too. He tries not to think about it but he knows it's because he has a reason now.

Again.

And it's been good for her, too. She's learning to trust an adult. She's learning to read. She's *learning*, in general. So he tells himself, every time she asks him *when*, that it's for the greater good. He *has* to lie to protect her, to keep her safe. It doesn't make him a hero, but he's not a villain, either.

7. Day 42-Safe

Safe

Eleven is tired of waiting.

She has been waiting for 42 days.

Hopper tells her she must, because it's not *safe*. He talks to her slowly, patiently. Making sure she understands the word. She knows what *safe* is.

She has always known that word.

And it's true, it's not *safe*. Not for her, and not for her friends. Not for anyone. When her frayed nerves snap, she asks him why is it *safe* for him, if it isn't for anyone else? He tries to explain. He tells her that he is the *Chief*. He is *police*. That means that it is his job to do things that aren't *safe*, to keep everyone else *safe*. He asks her, bending down to her level to look into angry eyes, doesn't she want her friends to stay *safe*? Safe from the Bad Men?

He can see her anger. It is hard to miss, because the plates are levitating. *She* may be angry, but he isn't. He isn't angry, but he is worried what she might do without even wanting to. Maybe without even knowing.

She is a powerful little girl, and her power is bigger than she is. He knows it and he never forgets it. He can't let himself forget it. He saw the school when she disappeared, the agents, and he knows what she can do as easily as a normal person breathes.

He holds his breath. Stays calm. He needs to diffuse her anger, and he knows exactly how. It's not fair, and it makes him feel like shit, but it works, every time. He asks her *the* question, very quietly.

Doesn't she want to keep Mike *safe*?

Eleven breaks down then and cries, because she is so tired of being unsafe.

It is scary to be hiding from the Bad Men.

It is even scary to be *away* from the Bad Men sometimes, because she has to learn how to be *normal*, and being *normal* is so hard and sometimes it makes her very tired. It gives her a headache.

It was scary fighting the Demogorgon, and being in the Upside Down.

She understands the scary feeling, because that's another word she's always known. She hates that feeling and how small it makes her feel. She hates it but she can handle it. And she can handle it because she's used to it. Hasn't she been unsafe her whole life?

But Mike is *safe*.

He is *safe* without her.

He had been *safe* for his whole life, before he brought her in from the rain and made her his friend. And then everything changed, because then he was unsafe. He was unsafe until she disappeared.

She hasn't forgotten when the Bad Men grabbed her friends that day at the school. They were going to kill them. Just because they were her friends. And, deeper in her mind, she remembers the first man. The nice man. The one who had fed her, and given her the first shirt she ever wore. He died, just because of her.

The idea of that happening again makes her panicky. It makes the unsafe feeling worse. She imagines Mike dying, just because of her. And she *breaks*. She can't let that happen.

The plates she has been levitating drop and the crash of broken china makes her cry harder. The plates are in a million pieces on the floor and she hates them for being broken because of her. She knows what broken is. Broken is *dead*. They are *dead*, because even Hopper's plates aren't *safe* from her.

She isn't *safe* at all.

She hasn't even been aware that she was using her power, and she could have hurt Hopper. Hurt him like the plates. That makes her sad, because he is nice some of the time, when he isn't being *cranky*.

She knows what cranky is, because cranky is Hopper. She likes him sixth best of all the people she likes. He buys her what she thinks of as Mike-food, because it's the first food he ever gave her. Eggos.

Hopper keeps her *safe*.

He is being nice right now. She likes it when he's nice.

He gently puts an arm around her and lets her cry all over his *police* clothes.

"Don't worry about the plates. I didn't like that color anyway," he says. She smiles, just a tiny half smile, but it makes him smile, too. And she is glad.

"It's not forever, Eleven. We just need to make sure that they aren't looking for you anymore. It just takes time-" he holds up a hand to forestall her question. "-I don't know how much time. Your Papa is dead. It could be over. But we need to make sure they don't try anything else, understand?" Eleven nods, sniffing.

"But-what if..." she asks in an even tinier voice than usual.

"What if what, kid?"

"What if they...*forget about me*?"

Hopper laughs, and she feels a little better because she can tell he thinks the idea is silly.

"Kid, there is no way that would happen. Friends don't forget about each other. Remember when Will was missing, and they never gave up on him?" She nods, but hesitantly.

"But that was only a week."

"Yeah, but friends never give up on each other. I *know* they haven't, because they talk about you all the time. They miss you." She files that away for later, when she will ask him what *missing* means. He is still talking, and she needs to listen closely.

"And you know that Mike hasn't forgotten you. He's talked into his

radio every night since you've been gone. He's gonna be thrilled to see you again."

"Promise?"

"Yep. Promise."

And she is half-satisfied, because that is true. He talks to her every night, even if she never talks to him. She hasn't been forgotten. She hasn't been forgotten, because she is his friend. And that reminds her of something else. She struggles, because she doesn't like to use so many words. She isn't used to words, but she is trying. Words are *normal*.

"But...friends don't...friends don't lie."

Hopper's eyebrows raise.

"How are you lying?"

Again, she struggles to answer using her mouth instead of her eyes. Mike understands her eye-speak, but no one else does.

"They think...Mike thinks I might be dead."

"Yeah?"

"And I'm not. So that's a lie."

Hopper sighs. He wishes that she hadn't learned her morality lessons from Mike Wheeler.

"Sometimes...sometimes a lie is okay, just for a little while, if it serves the *greater good*."

She tries to memorize the phrase because she can tell it's important.

"Do you know what that means?"

He watches her shake her head.

"Okay. It means that sometimes, you have to do a bad thing, to prevent-"he stops, backtracks. She won't know that word and he

wants to wrap this up. He cares for the girl, but it's been a long time since he's been a father and he's almost forgotten how. Has almost forgotten the sheer amount of *patience* it requires. "-to stop another bad thing from happening. Something even worse. So, when you used your power on those guards, that was for the *greater good*. That stopped them from hurting you, and hurting your friends. Right? So it was okay."

Eleven says she understands, and she almost does. But it still seems wrong to let them think she is dead, when she's been right here all along and they have been *missing* her. She decides not to ask Hopper what it means, because she thinks she knows. It's the way she feels right now when she thinks of her friends, and Mike. All of the nice people she met and knew too briefly.

"Will they forgive me?" she asks quietly. Her large eyes bore into his, watching his expression carefully for a lie.

"Kid, there's nothing to forgive. They won't be mad at you."

And Hopper knows they won't. They will, however, be furious with *him*. He's fine with that, because he has made a career out of pissing people off.

"And friends forgive each other anyway, right? Didn't Mike teach you that?" She nods, looking down and smiling another half-smile. Her face is visibly relieved and she looks happier than she has in a long, long time-42 days, to be exact. He's glad that he was able to make her feel that way. To make this fucking mess better for her, even slightly. It makes him feel peaceful, happier than he's been in a long, long time.

And then Hopper realizes, suddenly, that he hasn't forgotten how to be a father after all.

8. Day 47-The Words

The Words

Eleven is mollified, for now, and peace descends upon their tiny cabin. Things go back to the way they were. She eats Eggos every morning, and she watches TV or reads in the afternoon. She's not very good at it yet, but she is getting better. She has to, because she wants to read Mike's *stories*. She knows he loves to write *stories*. She knows what *stories* are. Stories are things that are made up, but different from lies. They are fun. You can watch them on the TV or read them in a book. Mike and his friends play the game, which is just another *story*. *Stories* are a *Mike* thing, a good thing. He tells her some of them over the radio, and she likes hearing them, because he acts out all of the voices.

At least until Nancy yells at him to shut up and what is he doing down there, anyway?

She knows that it will impress him if she can read his *stories* by herself.

He talks to her on the radio every night.

Sometimes he talks about school. He has Mr. Clarke again for *science*. She likes Mr. Clarke 9th best of all the people that she likes, even though she only met him once. She likes him because Mike likes him. And she knows what *science* is. *Science* means *facts*. Not lies. He tells her they win first place in the science fair. He babbles about the project and she doesn't understand it *at all*, but it's okay. She doesn't mind. He sounds happy and her heart contracts a little. That means that she is happy, too.

He talks about Troy and James, and how they practically run the other way to stay away from them now. They are terrified that Eleven will come back. Eleven is happy knowing they are *safe* from Troy and James. She hates Troy and James, so they aren't on her list of people that she likes. She wouldn't mind using her power on them again. She hasn't forgotten the moment Mike stepped off a cliff, or what would have happened if she hadn't heard them screaming from

her place in the forest.

If she had only been a second later in finding them.

Sometimes she has *nightmares* about that happening and she wakes up in tears. She knows what *nightmares* are. They are bad dreams of unsafe things. She hopes that someday she sees the *mouth breathers* again.

Sometimes Mike cries, and that makes her heart contract in a different way.

A sad way.

He tells her that he misses her, and that he hopes she's okay. Sometimes he looks for her, checking the old tree that temporarily served as a portal, just in case it opens again. He tells her that he hopes she isn't stuck in the Upside Down, and that he will never give up on finding her. Finding her and bringing her *home*. She knows what *home* is. Home is Eggos and her fort. *Home* means friends, and the people on her list.

Each time he talks about *home*, she has to stop herself from responding. She brings the night of the school to her mind, forcing herself to remember when the Bad Men grabbed Mike and pulled him away from her. They had guns, and they would have used them. Like they did on the first man, the nice man. The one that gave her food and a shirt.

Sometimes even *that* doesn't work, and then she bites her lip so hard that it bleeds and she *likes* that pain, because it's the only thing that stops her from saying the words.

Someday-Hopper has *promised*-it will all be over. She will be able to say the words. She likes to think about what that will be like. He will call on the radio and tell her what day it is. He tells her this every day.

Today is day 47.

Someday, he will tell her what happens at school. What funny things Dustin and Lucas say. She doesn't understand everything he says, but

that's okay. Mike always explains it, and then she thinks it's funny, too. He will tell her they are worried about Will, because they think something is wrong with him. Someday, he will tell her he hopes she's okay. And then, when he cries, she won't have to bite her lip. She will finally be able to say the words.

"Mike. I'm here."

9. Day 61-Days of Our Lives

Days of Our Lives

She likes *Days of Our Lives*. She likes the name, because it makes sense to her. These are the days of *her* life, too. What she thinks of as her *after life*. She likes almost everything she sees on TV, because it's all new to her. She doesn't understand what makes the stories bad or good, she just enjoys them. She knows that this show must be bad, because of Hopper.

On day 61, he is home before dark. That almost never happens. He comes in, takes off his hat and hangs it up. He sees Eleven, sitting on the floor with her face a foot away from the TV. She looks at him, her concentration broken, because she knows that being home before dark is different. It is not-normal. Her eyes ask a question, and this time, he understands.

"Slow day, kid. Came home for lunch. You want lunch?" She doesn't know what lunch is, so she doesn't say anything.

"You hungry?" She nods, and he makes them both a sandwich. Ham and mayonnaise for him, ham and mustard for her, because she hates the texture of the mayonnaise and refuses to try it. He sits, pats the couch, and she reluctantly moves away from the TV. He hands her the plate.

"*This*, kiddo, is lunch." Eleven just looks at him. He doesn't mind, sometimes she doesn't say a word. He doesn't push. He doesn't have much use for words, either. Hasn't in a long time. He is surprised when she shakes her head.

"No."

"No? No what?" She picks the crust off her sandwich. She doesn't like crusts. There's no point to crusts, because it isn't the good part. The food part.

"Not lunch."

"Why isn't it lunch?" Hopper asks, around a mouthful of ham. Eleven's eyebrows draw down together in a frown. She suspects he is lying to her, but she doesn't know why.

"Not lunch. *Sand-wich*," she enunciates each syllable clearly. Looks him in the eye to find the lie in his face.

"Oh." He swallows, sets the plate on his lap. "It's a sandwich, but it's also lunch. Although, it could be a snack or dinner or whatever. It's just a sandwich." She doesn't look pleased with this answer so he elaborates.

"Lunch is the second meal of the day, okay? You can eat whatever you want for lunch. You've had lunch before. Yesterday you had that leftover chicken, remember? That was lunch, because it was the second meal. That chicken was also dinner the night before, because it was the third meal of *that* day. Get it?" And she does. She swallows a tiny bite.

"Eggos?"

It would be easy to assume that she means she wants Eggos for lunch, but he knows her thought process a little by now. He picks his plate back up. "Eggos are breakfast for most people. First meal." He considers. "Any meal for you." She nods and slides her eyes back to the TV and he can see the conversation is over. He turns his attention to the TV as well.

"Whatcha watching?"

"TV," she answers vaguely, and Hopper sighs.

"Yeah. I sort of gathered that. I meant, what's this particular show called?"

"Oh." Silence. Then, "*Days of Our Lives*." Hopper chokes, and Eleven watches as bread sprays out of his mouth. She raises her eyebrows, slightly. Food has never come out of his mouth before. It is definitely a not-normal thing. He takes a swig of soda to unstick the wad in his throat. Stares at her. She stares back.

"Why are you watching *THAT*?" he asks. He is horrified.

"Like it," she says.

"*Jesus Christ*, kid." She doesn't know what that means, but she knows people say it for a lot of reasons. When things are bad, or good, or just confusing. She considers his face carefully and sees that it's bad.

"Why *the hell* are you watching that crap? Why aren't you working on your math workbook?" She shrugs. Hopper sighs. "Okay, I'm gonna ignore that for now. Actually no, I'm not. You need to work on your homework every day, okay? *Then* you can watch TV."

Eleven shakes her head. *No*.

"Not on later," she says. "*Homework* later." Hopper is speechless. He doesn't know how to handle this one. On one hand, there's nothing *wrong* with the show. It's not going to corrupt her and it sure as hell won't show her anything worse than what she's already experienced. On the other hand. She is a 12 year old kid glued to the soaps like an aging housewife. *What the hell*. It could be worse, she could be watching infomercials. And maybe she will forget about trashy daytime TV when she's allowed outside again.

He hopes, anyway.

"All right, fine. You win. Just promise me you'll watch other things besides the soaps, okay? Unless you want me to get you a bathrobe and a couple of cats, anyway."

She doesn't understand a lot of things in that sentence. She likes cats. That's why she couldn't hurt one, even though Papa was angry with her. Does Hopper not like cats? She doesn't like to think that Papa and Hopper have anything in common. She doesn't know what a bathrobe is, but Papa made her get in the bath a lot. She knows now that a bath can mean something different, something fun, and she hopes that's what Hopper meant. It makes sense to her, because she uses soap in the new bath. Although there isn't any soap in the show. She turns her gaze to the TV again. Considers it.

"No soap," she says, although she isn't sure. The people are all very clean and pretty except for Marlena because she is *kidnapped*, so there must be soap somewhere? Maybe she hasn't seen that part yet.

"Oh yeah," he says, because he is always forgetting. She's just too *literal*. "This show-and other shows with dumb things that couldn't happen in real life-are called *soap operas*."

"Why?" She asks. He isn't listening, because he's thinking that his life lately is a hell of a lot less realistic than a soap opera. The proof is right next to him. She repeats her question, and he is stumped.

"Um. I don't actually know why they call it that," he says, and gives up. It's not worth it. Sometimes that happens when he runs out of patience, so she will add it to her list of things to ask Mike. Mike will know. Resigned, he picks up the remote and turns the volume up.

"Who's that?" he asks, pointing.

"Bo and Hope," she answers. Bo and Hope are arguing. There's something about an ex and a kidnapping-not the Marlina kidnapping-and an impersonation. He turns up the volume a little more so he can hear them. It's kind of interesting. It beats work, anyway. He watches Bo and Hope embrace passionately, and suddenly feels uncomfortable.

"I guess she doesn't care about Kristen impersonating her last week?" he asks after a moment. Bo and Hope are still kissing. He prays that Eleven won't ask him what they're doing on screen. He wishes he had eaten at work instead, but Eleven seems happy to have the company.

"No. They are friends." Hopper sincerely hopes that she doesn't do what Bo and Hope are doing with all of her friends in a few years. He starts to tell her that they aren't exactly *friends*, but before he can say a word, she clarifies, "they are *more than friends*." And he breathes again. No need to discuss it. *Thank Christ*.

"Yep. Looks like he's more than her friend, all right," he says easily. He sees Eleven's smile out of the corner of his eye.

"Like Mike," she says, and his mouth falls open. His eyebrows shoot up and he is fervently glad he finished the sandwich. He *really, really* wishes he had stayed at work today. Or at home. His other home. In bed. He's starting to feel a little ill.

"Like...*Mike*?"

She smiles at him. "Yes."

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Wishes that Joyce had ended up with Eleven instead of him. She'd know how to handle this kind of thing.

"So you like Mike, huh?"

"Yes." And it seems like she is finished. Hopper gratefully turns back to the TV. She's almost a teenager, it's normal to have a crush. He remembers his first crush fondly. He pulled her hair in class. It was completely innocent. No need to worry about anything more than that for a few years, and by then she will be somewhere else. That makes him sadder than he expected. He's getting attached. He's also relieved that he won't have to deal with the whole dating thing. He shudders slightly just thinking about it.

"We are *more than friends*," she says, and he is disturbed all over again. He calms himself down, reminding himself that she doesn't understand. She probably thinks that if you like someone, that's *it*. She doesn't know anything comes after that.

"Yeah? He seems like a good kid. More than friends, huh?" is all he says.

"Yes. He did that," she says. Tilts her head to the screen, where Bo is still kissing Hope. Hopper feels like his eyes are just slightly too big for their sockets right now. Stretched. His mouth attempts to pull itself into a rictus smile because she is smiling at *him* and he doesn't want to scare her.

"Wait-he KISSED you?"

"*Kiss*?"

"Yeah! Kiss! *That*!" And he points at the TV.

Eleven looks at Bo and Hope for a moment.

"Oh. Yes. *Kissed*."

"When the hell did *that* happen?" His voice sounds a little strangled, and she looks at him curiously. Maybe some of the sandwich is still stuck in there?

"At school. Before Demogorgon."

"Just once?" he asks. It's bad, but it could be worse. *Jesus Christ*. She lived in the kid's basement for a *week*. He doesn't let his mind go there.

"Yes." He takes a deep breath and turns his attention back to the TV. Okay. No big deal. "For now," she adds, and he gets up abruptly. Snaps the TV off. There's no need for her to get any more ideas.

"*Jesus Christ*," he mutters, and she looks angry.

"Turn it back on," she says.

"Nope, that's enough of that crap for today. Math book, *now*." She looks at him coolly before turning away. "*After*," she says, and glares at the TV. The TV turns back on. Hopper turns it off again. She turns it back on, and even Hopper can see that this can go on all day. He gives in. Again. *What the hell*.

"Fine, but *right after* this show, all right? I mean it," he growls, and she smiles at him.

"Okay," then after a pause, "thank you." He smiles back, and settles in. Turns the volume up. He's already home, might as well see the end of it. He's not happy about the Wheeler kid, or the *kissing*, but he likes this quiet time with Eleven. He decides to have lunch at home more often, and that's exactly what he does for the rest of their time together. No matter what his schedule is like, he is always home in time for *Days of Our Lives*.

After a week, he's as hooked on it as she is.

10. Day 112-Learning Normal

Learning Normal

Hopper sometimes regrets that he initially encouraged Eleven to watch TV. She is obsessed with it, and rarely consents to turn it off. She even leaves it on in her sleep. She sometimes watches it with a concentration that unnerves him. Her eyebrows draw down into a frown and she looks like a law student studying for the Bar, not a 12 year old kid watching cartoons. He knows she hasn't had a lot of experience with normal things like TV, but it can't be healthy to watch it for 12 hours straight. It can't be healthy to take it so seriously. She barely even *blinks*. Sometimes she mouths the actor's lines or copies their movements. It's funny, in a way, but also a little sad.

He doesn't know what to do about it.

He doesn't know what to do about *her*.

When she first came here, she pleaded with him not to leave her alone. He tried to explain about his job. She either didn't understand or didn't want to. She didn't like being alone and she still doesn't. In what she thinks of as her *before life*, she had only been alone when she was being *punished*.

When she had been a *bad girl*.

She still associates being alone with being *punished*. On her first day with him, he gently told her he wasn't *punishing* her, he had to leave, every day, to *work*. That's when she learns about *chief*, and *police*. That is his *job*. A *job* is something you have to do, and everyone has one when they are old. His *job* means keeping people *safe*.

People like her.

And that's how she learns that this, being here, isn't *home*. Even if there is food and clothes and Eggos. This is just his *job*. That makes her a little sad, but she already has a *home*, doesn't she? It's with Mike. It's her fort. Her friends. The people on her list. She keeps

Hopper on her list, even if she doesn't have a *home* with him. She still likes him 6th best.

Still, she hates being left alone.

He tries to comfort her. He will *always* come back, he tells her. Every night. She makes him promise, just in case, and he does, so she feels better.

He jokes that she could watch TV, and then she won't really be alone. She will have someone to watch and listen to, at least. He sees her gaze fall on the TV, considering it, and chuckles. He thinks it will keep her mind off her friends, at least for a few hours every day.

He doesn't understand that what he said next still haunts her.

"A little TV would be good for you, kid. Teach you how to be normal."

She vaguely understands that he doesn't mean to hurt her feelings, to contract her heart in the sad way. She doesn't think he even realizes the importance of that sentence. And she doesn't blame him because it's true.

She isn't *normal*.

She has *always*, *always* known that. Sometimes she counts the way in which she is not-*normal*, and she knows that even *that* is not-*normal*. She knows that it isn't, but she can't help it. In her *before life*, *normal* people had clipboards. They wore white coats. They were in charge.

That was the first difference.

They told her what to do, and if she did it, she sometimes got a pat on the shoulder or a soft touch on her head. She liked being touched, she liked being a *good girl*. She understood from the very beginning that she was the only one who was different in those endless bright rooms full of doctors and agents and her Papa. They were all on one side, and she was on the other.

She was alone.

She was alone because no one else was like her.

She had *power*.

That was the second difference.

If they all had her power, they wouldn't be studying her. They told her she was *special, extraordinary, incredible* and she knew those words meant *different*.

Not-*normal*.

But she can't help that.

She didn't choose her power and she didn't choose to live with Papa. And when she thinks about this after a *nightmare* in the *bad place*, she realizes the importance of choice. The Bad Men (and Bad Women) *chose* to be there. They went home sometimes, and come back. They were replaced by other Bad Men (and Women) when they no longer wanted to be there. She couldn't choose anything.

And that was the third difference.

She couldn't choose what to wear. She always wore a scratchy white gown, unless she was in the bath.

She couldn't choose what to eat. They brought her meals, and she ate them because she was hungry. Because she needed the strength they gave her. Sometimes they tasted good, and sometimes they didn't. But she ate them anyway, because she had to.

She couldn't choose *when* to eat. The first meal came every day, when Papa woke her up. The second meal was after the tests. The third meal-the biggest meal-was always after the bath.

She couldn't choose to leave a night-light on, even when she was afraid of the dark.

She couldn't choose to leave, because they would hurt her.

And she couldn't choose to have hair. She has never had hair, because she always wore the wires. They shaved her head regularly,

and it bothered her a lot. She liked hair of all colors and wished that she could have some, too.

That is the fourth difference.

She realized that she had *extraordinary* power. But she was also powerless. She hated that feeling and one day, she snapped. She killed the guards with a jerk of her head and crawled through mud until she escaped. When she finally did make that choice, she thought her life would finally be different. Normal. She would have choices. She would be *safe*.

And then when the first man-the *nice man*-died she saw that she still didn't have a choice, because they will always come after her. They will *always* make her unsafe. And that's why she can't see Mike and the other people on her list.

That is the fifth difference.

It's actually worse in her *after life*, and that makes her *confused*. She knows what *confused* means, because she feels that way all the time. *Confused* means not knowing things. And there is so, so much that she doesn't know. She thought, in her *before life*, that maybe it was because she was a child surrounded by adults, that she didn't know things. She thought that just maybe, other children would be more like her, even if they didn't share her power. Then she met Mike and Lucas and Dustin and realized all over again that she isn't *normal*.

It turned out that even her name isn't *normal*.

She never realized, in her *before life*, that Eleven is not a name. She didn't know anything was wrong with her name until she sees Mike's look of shock when she points to herself. When she explains her tattoo. And that leads to another unpleasant realization, having tattoos is not *normal* either. Mike makes her feel better about it, and calls her El. She thought that maybe Eleven isn't such a bad name because Mike likes it, and then she hears Lucas and Dustin. They don't understand why she is Eleven.

She learned that Eleven is only a number.

Not a person.

She realized that she isn't really a person, either.

Not yet.

She is still just Eleven, the last test subject.

She sometimes wonders what happened to the other 10.

She feels shame that her name is not really a name, but Mike seems to think it's *cool* and that confuses her. She isn't cold at all, not anymore. She is nice and warm because he gave her clothes and blankets and a fort. When she asks him about it, he laughs in that Mike-way, which is a nice way, and says that *cool* also means that something is *interesting*. When she asks what *that* means, he struggles for a moment, trying to choose a word that she would understand.

"Cool means nice. I like your name, it's nice. And El is a nice nickname..." and-before she can even ask-"like Mike is just a nickname or another name for Michael."

And now she's okay with being Eleven. And El. It's *nice*. She knows what *nice* is. Mike is *nice*, so it's definitely a good thing.

But she doesn't *know* anything, and they figure that out quickly. She can barely read or write, and she can't tell time. She doesn't know the words they know, or the words that describe the words. Sometimes she doesn't even know the words that describe the words that describe the other words.

The words make her tired.

She doesn't know what privacy is, and that scares them all for some reason. She turns pink thinking of it now. Dustin calls her a *weirdo* and she doesn't know that that means, but she *does* know what it means. Lucas calls her a *freak* and she doesn't know what it means, but she also *does* know. It means not-normal. Not like *them*. She knows that Lucas feels bad about calling her that, but she doesn't blame him. She doesn't blame him because it's true.

She is a *freak*.

Why else would they dress her up in Nancy's clothes, and make her wear a wig?

So she could look *normal*.

She likes the wig. She likes having hair. She asks them if she looks pretty, and she knows what pretty means. She has known that word for a long time. It means *nice*. And *normal*. Mike says she looks pretty good, and she looks at herself in the mirror. It's true. She looks like El. Not the number, but a person.

It's clear that having hair is important to being normal, and she is fiercely glad that hers is growing. She checks it every day in the mirror. It's still short, shorter than Mike's, but it makes her less of a *freak*. She hopes that it grows fast, so that the next time she sees him, she will look *normal*, too. She knows, deep down, that Mike won't care about her hair. He told her she was still pretty, even after she lost her wig. That's partly why she likes Mike so much. He never makes her feel not-normal. He is always patient and doesn't mind explaining things. She feels like she can ask him anything. He always tries to make her feel better. He never calls her a *freak*, or a *weirdo*.

But...

She remembers-very well-the first time he was angry with her. He has been angry with her two times, and she hates those memories. She never visits those memories when she is trying to sleep. He had screamed at her, voice breaking, "What is *wrong* with you? What is *wrong* with you?" Over and over while she cried, not knowing what she had done wrong. She only knew that something was *wrong* with her, and she has always known that. That tells her something important. Mike may be patient and *nice*, but he knows she is not-normal, too. So now, 112 days after the Upside Down, she works hard to erase her freakishness.

She is learning to read. She is learning about *money* and *science* and *history* from Hopper. She watches TV the rest of the time and learns even more. She listens intently as the actors talk to each other and memorizes their facial expressions. She mimics their gestures and the inflection of their voices. She learns how to talk to people and what their words mean and if she doesn't know them, she looks them up in

a book Hopper gave her, a *dictionary*. She doesn't know what *that* word means either, and she looks it up in the *dictionary*. Hopper tells her that's okay. It's okay to learn, and she is learning a lot. Sometimes it makes her head hurt and her eyes water, but that's okay, too. She doesn't mind. She wants to learn to be more like her friends, more like a person and less like a test subject. She wants more, than anything, to learn how to be *normal*.

For her friends.

For Mike.

And for herself.

She isn't *normal* yet, but she hopes that someday she will be.

She is fine with being Eleven, but she also wants to be more than a number.

She wants to be El.

11. Day 212-Radio Silence

Radio Silence

It finally happens, the thing she fears so much. She believed Hopper. She believed Mike, but somehow she has always been afraid this would happen. And now, she sees, she is right to be afraid.

He doesn't call her today.

She waits anyway, anxiously checking her watch-Mike's watch. She checks it a lot. She loves the watch. He gave it back to her after the bath, and she hasn't taken it off since. It is 7-4-0, which is when Mike always talks to her. He has talked to her at 7-4-0 for the past 212 days.

What is wrong?

Is Mike hurt? She thinks of the many ways he could be hurt. Troy and James. His bike. The Bad Men? There are too many things in her *after life* that hurt to imagine them all and it makes her heart contract in the sad way to even try.

Did he forget? This is the worst of her fears. She hopes that he will never forget her, and she tries to believe him when he says that he won't. She can't help the fear feeling. It has been 212 days, and that is a long time. She is learning from TV and *stories*, and one thing she learns is that people forget easily. She knows it must be true, because she sees it over and over again. It happens today, on day 212 when she is watching *Days of Our Lives*. Today is day 212. Last week, on day 209, Bo and Hope were *more than friends*. Today, on day 212, he is *more than friends* with someone else. She doesn't understand it at all, but she knows it means he has forgotten her. And that was only after *three* days. It has been 212 days since the Demogorgon. She hopes that it's different, because Mike is *nice*. But Bo has always seemed *nice*, too, so she isn't sure. She can't think about that anymore because it makes the fear feeling worse.

She tries to think of another reason instead. Did he just talk to her earlier today, but she missed it? She hates herself for being away

from her super-comm and radio earlier today if that's what happened.

Or maybe he is just late? He will still talk to her?

She checks her watch-Mike's watch-again. It is 7-4-5 and that is much, much later than 7-4-0. She bites her lip and doesn't notice the pain. She is clutching the super-comm in a palm that is suddenly sweaty with fear and she is dangerously close to using her power. That happens when she gets upset. She loses control. She becomes unsafe.

She takes a deep breath, then another. And another. She does that until she can feel her power receding. She gets up slowly from her little desk. Slow is best, because that keeps her calm. She has to stay calm and be *safe*. She moves slowly, carefully into the "living room" (even though no one lives there, she has her little room and Hopper has one, too) and checks the big, loud watch on the wall that chimes every hour. It is now 7-5-2. She sinks into the couch, still clutching the super-comm Hopper gave her.

When Hopper comes in hours later, he is taken aback. Eleven is not in bed, as she usually is at this time. She is staring blankly at the wall, knees curled up to her chest, chin resting on her knees. It is the blank look on her face that scares him. She has regressed to before he even knew her. He has listened to the boys and knows how silent she was at first. He doesn't know what's happened, but he knows it can't be good, so when he speaks, it's in a much less gruff voice than usual.

"El?" She doesn't move. Doesn't give any sign that she has either heard him or seen him.

"Eleven?" She hasn't blinked since he shut the door.

He sits down gingerly next to her, and puts a tender hand on her shoulder. He can feel how tense she is, and he gently rubs his hand in a soothing circle.

"Honey?" He has never called her that before, but maybe it will help. He bends his head a little until he is on eye level with her.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

She blinks.

He takes that as an encouraging sign.

"What happened, honey? Tell me." He is careful to keep his voice as soft and soothing as he can. She slowly uncurls herself. "Did-did the Bad Men come? Did someone try to hurt you?" A tiny head shake. "Were you scared? Did something scare you?" She starts to shake her head, because no, nothing scary has happened, she is *safe*, but then she thinks that it's scary that Mike hasn't talked to her today and that makes her feel really *unsafe* so she starts to nod instead. It confuses the hell out of him. He tries again.

"Can you tell me what upset you?" She still hasn't found the words, yet, but her right hand gives a tiny twitch, and Hopper's eyes are drawn to the super-comm clutched in it. He glances at the clock and sees that it is precisely eleven. He smiles at the girl Eleven and knows exactly what happened.

"Did Mike call you today?" She jerks her head, quickly. Just once.

"Oh. Radio silence, huh?" A mournful nod.

"Yes. It was silent. He didn't call."

She almost sounds like a normal pre-teen moaning about her boyfriend. He feels the ghost of a grin touch his lips and then sees that she's starting to cry. That sobers him quickly. He's silent for a few moments. He has been afraid of this. He has also longed for this. It's hard to hear how depressed the Wheeler boy has been and it's made it that much harder to keep Eleven inside, because every time she hears his voice, she demands to see him. Hopper has been hoping that the bond between them would fade slightly because it's actually a little scary. They are only 12 years old, for Christ's sake. He can't remember being that attached to anyone at the age of 12. Or ever, actually, until he became a father.

It can't be healthy.

But he can't deny that Mike's voice is the only thing that makes her happy. She lights up when he speaks, and looks fully alive. It's the

only time she has that look, and he decides now that it's okay. He hopes Wheeler calls her every day for the rest of his damn life, if it makes her feel hopeful and happy. He has promised that she will see him again, and he means to keep it. But he has always kept the timing vague. He has no idea when that will happen. It could be years. He knows very well that Wheeler will eventually give up. Every day he will lose a little more hope that she might have survived. And he's only 12. Kids heal fast. As he watches her face turn red from crying, he swears he will kill Wheeler if he gives up on her, even if it takes 11 years before it's safe for her to leave.

"Oh honey, it's okay. He's probably just busy."

And Eleven responds immediately.

"He was never too busy for me *before*." Her haughty, confident voice makes him choke back a laugh.

"I know, but sometimes things happen and people get busier than normal. It's okay."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would people get busier?" He sighs, but very quietly. "He might have a lot of homework, or a project, or a test to study for."

"It's the *week-end*," she retorts, enunciating this new word carefully.

"Sometimes people have to study on the weekend, when they have a big test." He can see she isn't satisfied with that answer. "Or maybe-like you said, it's the weekend. He might be at the movies with the guys."

Her frown fades a tiny bit, because she knows they like movies.

"And he's probably just getting home, and getting ready for bed. Maybe he will call you a little later-"her eyes start to get hopeful again and he quickly backtracks-"or maybe he was just so tired that he fell asleep and he'll call you tomorrow."

She looks sad again.

"Maybe he slept over at Lucas's or Dustin's, and he forgot his super-comm."

"*They* both have super-comms, too," she points out. He thinks for a minute.

"Yeah, but he likes to talk to you in private. Without the guys listening. So he wouldn't be able to use it."

The fear feeling is leaving her a little, leaving her slightly more relaxed, leaning her head on Hopper's side. He has given her a lot of very good reasons why Mike might not have called, and she feels a little better. She is also still a little afraid.

"Hopper?"

"Yeah?"

"What if...what if he forgot about me?"

It's not the first time that she has asked, and it won't be the last.

"He didn't. Friends don't forget friends, and especially not after a day." Eleven stirs. She has almost been asleep.

"It hasn't been a day. It has been 2-" and he cuts her off. She is too literal for her own good. "Yeah, true. *But*. He called you yesterday, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. He hasn't forgotten about you between yesterday and today." And he knows her well enough by now to know what she will say next.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

And she consents to be tucked in, which is the first time for both of

them, and is able to fall asleep, but she won't let him take the super-comm away from her. He hopes that's it and things go back to normal. *Their* version of normal. He was an idiot before, he realizes that now. She needs a lifeline, and Hopper has tried to be that. But it's Mike. It always was and always will be.

Mike calls the next night, right at 7-4-0.

She has been lying in bed, curled into the fetal position.

Just in case.

When she hears the crackle of static, she sits up ramrod-straight. Her heart is contracting, contracting, contracting and in the good way. The best way.

"Hey, El. Over." His voice is scratchy. She hears him cough. "Sorry I didn't call you yesterday. Over." He always talks like that, as if she is just a normal friend that he last saw the day before. It soothes them both. "I've got strep throat, and I feel like crap. I just passed out yesterday in front of the TV like my Nana always does. Ov-" more coughing-"er."

She pushes the talk button and opens her mouth. It's only for a second, and she only makes the tiniest of sounds. A slight squeak as she cuts off the first word before it comes out, then a slight exhaled breath as she bites her bottom lip so hard that there is blood. She knows there's blood because she can taste it. She's tasted it a lot. Her finger immediately jerks away from the button and she is terrified. Excited.

She pressed the button.

She has never, ever pressed the button.

She is not allowed to press the button.

She *knows this, knows this, knows this*, because the radio makes a crackly static sound when the button is pressed. It's how she knew Mike was about to speak. *If he heard-!* Hopper will be so angry. She is not supposed to let anyone know she is here. It's not *safe*. She will have to use her words to tell him, tell him that she really didn't mean

to.

And she really hadn't. She had been so focused on *strep throat*, she had forgotten that she can't actually talk to him. She pressed the button to ask the instinctive question, the type of question she always asked Mike when they talked. She feels terrified and excited and queasy all at once. Maybe this is it. Maybe this will force Hopper to come clean, and figure out a different way to keep them all *safe*.

And in the back of her mind, she makes a mental note to ask Hopper what *strep throat* is. She will ask Hopper what that means, once he isn't angry anymore.

But maybe she won't have to?

Maybe she can ask Mike?

Soon?

She suddenly know what *passing out* feels like, because that's what she's about to do. She hasn't breathed since she accidentally pressed the button. She carefully checks that the button isn't depressed, then gulps in air. She waits, heart beating wildly.

Did he hear?

She tells herself not to get her hopes up.

It was only for a second.

She barely made any noise.

He had been coughing and probably didn't hear it anyway.

He will think someone else is on their channel.

She waits.

There's a *long, long, long* silence.

"Um." She strains to understand what she's hearing in that tiny syllable. He sounds a lot quieter. His voice is very low. Is that

because of *strep throat*? Or because of *her*?

"So I'm not feeling that great. Over." And he sounds completely normal now. Her heart sinks, but it's still good to hear his voice, and she savors it. "I'm on antibiotics," he starts.

And, carefully keeping her finger away from the button, she asks softly, "what are antibiotics, Mike?"

"Antibiotics are pills or little things you swallow when you're sick. They make you feel better and they make sure you don't get anyone else sick with your germs. Over." And now she knows what those are, because she has had them before, in the lab, in her *before life*.

What are germs, Mike?

"Germs are things in your body or around you that can make you sick for awhile, but it's no big deal. Like when I cough right now, germs come out. That sounds really gross, I know, but you can't see them or anything. But if you were here-" his voice catches and he pauses. "If you were here, you'd probably get strep throat, too, and then you'd be on antibiotics. Over." Another pause.

"I really miss you, El. Over."

I miss you, too, Mike.

"I hope that you're okay. I can't really talk much today, because my throat hurts. Over." She is sad but she understands.

Okay, Mike.

"But um, I heard this song the other day, and it made me think of you. So I'm not going to talk but I'll play it for you, okay? Hang on. Over." And she hears music. She knows what music is, because her friends played it for her before. She listens carefully to the song, trying to memorize it. She wants to memorize everything that Mike gives her. When it's over, there's a moment of silence, and then Mike is back. He sounds mortified and she knows his pale cheeks are turning pink.

"So that's a little sappy and everything, so don't tell the guys, okay?"

Over."

What is sappy, Mike?

"Sappy is like, too cheesy. Over."

Cheesy? She likes cheese, especially the white kind.

And Mike laughs, as if he hears her. Not a bad laugh. Not a mean laugh. A *nice* one.

"Cheesy is like, too sweet or emotional, that kind of thing. Kind of embarrassing. Something that's not for friends. Over."

Not for friends?

"Like, you know, for people who are more than friends. Like...when I asked you to the Snow Ball. Over." She thinks of the thing he did after that, before the Bad Men and the Demogorgon. She has seen it on TV, and she knows what it means.

More than friends.

Mike sounds mortified again, as if he is thinking of it, too. "Anyway... sometimes cheesy or sappy is okay with some people when they are more than friends. The guys wouldn't like it but I still think it's a good song...and it made me think of you. I hope you liked it. Over."

Thank you.

"So...this is good night. I need to take my pill and go to bed. This is day 213. Over." And she can hear him sigh. She thinks he is done, although he hasn't said the last part that he always says. There's a long, long, long silence.

"El...?" She thinks-but isn't sure-that it sounds like a question.

Like he is waiting-*hoping*-for a response. Then he sighs. She sighs, too, but that's okay. Her fingers are laced together in her lap and she can't press the button. She says it anyway, aloud this time. Careful to keep her hands in her lap.

"Good night, Mike." And he responds, right away. As if he heard her.

"Good night, Eleven. Over and out." And just like that, it's back to *radio silence* but the fear feeling is completely gone. Because he hasn't forgotten her, and he will be back.

The radio will only be silent until 7-4-0 tomorrow.

12. Radio Silence, concluded

Radio Silence, Concluded

It's a Saturday night and Mike is sick.

He has strep throat, *again*.

It's the fourth time he's had it this year and he knows his parents and Nancy are worried. They will tell him to stop spending so much time outside, it's too cold to play outside after dark. He hasn't been sleeping well and his immune system is shot. He won't tell them any differently, but he thinks that Nancy knows. She's a lot more intuitive than she used to be. When he's outside alone, he isn't playing. He's looking for Eleven.

The guys helped at first. They were happy to do it. She was part of their party, after all, and she had saved all of their lives. Including Will's, and she had only met him once. Mike figured that didn't count anyway because it was in a fucked-up vision in the kiddie pool. Today they finally went to the lab. They managed to look in the bottom windows (Lucas was more daring and actually made it inside) before they were shooed away. It no longer seems likely that they will find any trace of her there.

Mike felt fine this morning. He only started feeling sick when he biked home, and feeling terrible by the time he opened the door.

They checked Mike's house first, *that night*. Her fort was still scattered around the room because Mike had knocked it down. There was no sign of her. He carefully put the fort back together, just in case. It's been there ever since.

They checked the forest after, calling for her. Looking for any sign that she had been there. Lucas is the one who found her wig, right next to the stream. He gave it to Mike, and Mike cleaned it and kept it. He still has it. He knows it's pathetic, but he can't help it. It's a little piece of her. It proves that she existed. Mike grilled Nancy and she had shown him which tree had acted as a portal to the Upside Down. It was easier to find it again than she expected, because one

side of the tree is black and dead. They can't get into the Upside Down from there, but it doesn't rule anything out. At first, they assumed she was stuck in the Upside Down, and that's why they've checked every known portal that they could find. Mike even ran his hands over the wall in Will's house, just in case, the night Will came home from the hospital. Joyce saw him and didn't say a word, she just looked at him with too-bright eyes and touched him gently on the shoulder before leaving him alone. Joyce was doing her own mourning. She wouldn't forget the brave, scared girl who had saved her son's life. Mike was embarrassed but it didn't matter. The wall was just a wall. The only evidence it had ever been more than a wall was the fresh plaster.

He looked for any sign of her that he could find. When the power went out one day, he remembered how Will had spoken through the lights and was struck by a surety. *This was it.* She was going to speak to him. His mouth was dry and he was so sure that something was going to happen, he almost imagined it.

Nothing had happened.

He tried not to be disappointed. It was raining after all, and a power outage was completely normal. It didn't mean that she wasn't there. That she wouldn't speak to him that way eventually. He remembered how drained she had been that last day. She probably just needed time to gather her strength before communicating.

Maybe he could make it easier for her. He tried just thinking extra hard, not *about* her but *at* her. If she had heard Will's voice in her mind, maybe she could hear his. He tried to keep his mind as empty as possible at those times, to make it easier for her to make contact.

Nothing happened.

Nothing ever seemed to happen. They never made any progress.

And now, they weren't even sure that she was in the Upside Down.

After the last D&D session, Will had hesitantly told them of his problem. They were horrified he had kept it a secret, and tried to figure out how to help him. They were talking loudly and

overlapping each other and just generally freaking the fuck out. Will waved for them to be quiet after a moment.

"That's not the point, guys."

Dustin's eyes bugged out of his head. "Um, then what IS the point? You're tossing up slugs, man. That *seems really, definitely, exceptionally* pointy to me." Lucas and Mike tended to agree. They were still horrified. *Slugs*. That was bad enough, but *slugs from the Upside Down*. How the *hell* were they supposed to fix *that*? Will sighed.

"Yeah, and that sucks." He glared at Dustin to shut him up as he muttered something about an "*understatement of the year*" before continuing. "And we need to figure it out. But..." he trailed off uncertainly. He didn't want to bring her name up. Sometimes Mike just didn't handle it well, and Will knew it. Will's empathy was *his* superpower. He didn't want to hurt his friend.

"But what?" Lucas asked. They were all crowded around him, as if they could help his problem just by hovering less than an inch way from him. It wouldn't have been so bad, but Lucas had eaten pizza with anchovies and onions earlier. Will leaned back, away from the anchovy stink, and looked at the fort. Dustin followed his gaze.

"Eleven? What about her?" Mike looked away, but he didn't try to change the subject this time. "Well...whenever it happens, I flip."

"*Flip?*"

"Yeah, I flip to the Upside Down. Sometimes for just a few seconds, sometimes for like an hour."

And suddenly they were all inches away from him again, as if they could keep him in this dimension by just crowding him and suffocating him with their mingled pizza-breath. Their voices started to clamor over each other again, and he waved for them to shut up. They did.

Lucas took a deep breath.

"So?"

"So-if she were stuck in the Upside Down, wouldn't I have *seen* her by now?" They looked at each other, dumbfounded.

"Well, maybe she's just not where your house is," Lucas reasoned.

"Yeah, probably not, but I've been all *over* town when it's happened. The arcade, school, the forest, the movies, even here. And I've never seen *her*, or any sign of her. I haven't seen anything living." He regretted the use of that word immediately when he saw the expression on Mike's face. "I just mean, I haven't seen any sign that anyone's been there. I don't think she's there," he added hastily and Mike's face relaxed a little. They were all silent.

And they were all staring at Mike.

"Guys. She's not...she's not *dead*. She *can't be*. There was no body. She just disappeared." His eyes begged for them to agree. Dustin nodded, slowly. He didn't know where the hell Eleven was, but Mike's point was certainly true. There wasn't a body. He was more than willing to agree with Mike.

"Yeah, and if she had died, her *body* would at least be in the Upside Down, right? Right where the school is."

"Exactly," Mike said firmly. There was no room for argument in the tone. Eleven was alive, and that was that. "And Will, you've flipped from the school, right?"

"Yeah," Will answered quietly. "Right from the science room, actually. Just for a second."

Dustin goggled again. He wondered how they hadn't noticed their friend just popping the fuck right out of existence, *right next to them*, but he let it go with an effort. It was clear that Will wanted this discussion to be about Eleven, and not himself. "And you haven't seen her body?" Will shook his head and Dustin looked satisfied. "So she definitely isn't dead."

Lucas was less sure, and he glanced at Will. Will, to be honest, had no idea what had happened to the girl. He didn't know if she was dead or alive, but it was certainly true that he'd never seen her body.

Although...he had never seen the corpse of the Demogorgon before, either. He kept his mouth shut about *that*, though.

Lucas was either braver or less empathetic than Will, and had no trouble asking what Will couldn't. He hated to hurt his friends, and he hated it to be true because she had been *his* friend, too, but facts were facts. "Then *where is she*? It's been months, and nothing."

Will spoke up again. "Well, I had an idea. I have no idea if it's what happened, it's just a theory."

"Theories are better than anything else we have right now," Dustin muttered.

"What if-what if she DID flip, when she killed the Demogorgon? And then she was like, drained or something, and couldn't get back right away?"

"Okay, and then what happened?"

"Well," and his voice got a little higher with excitement. He felt like Eleven was one of his best friends, too, after all, even if they hadn't actually met. Yet. He hoped.

"Okay, so, she starts feeling stronger, and she can come through a portal or flip back or whatever the hell she does, but by that time, you're already gone, right? Because the police and your parents and those government weirdos showed up, and you guys came to the hospital to see *me*."

"Okay, yeah? So she shows up back in the school, and?" Dustin prompted his friend, but then his mouth dropped open as he figured it out for himself. "Oh *shit*."

"What?" Lucas asked.

"*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god*-" Dustin babbled.

Mike cut him off. His voice was dull. They've wasted months, fucking MONTHS, looking for the Upside Down. "-and she flips back right when those government assholes are poking around. *They've got her*." They all looked at each other bleakly, because breaking into a top-

secret military facility sounded a hell of a lot more difficult than just finding a portal to an evil dimension. That place was like a fortress.

They had spied on the building for days, trying to figure out a way in besides the pipe. The pipe would be the last resort because it ended right in front of the fucking front doors. They wouldn't be able to sneak in that way. In the end, though, they all crawled through, except for Dustin. He stayed behind to act as lookout with his super-comm, and also because he couldn't fit. Will crawled out first, and barely made it out before someone grabbed his shoulder. It wasn't a government weirdo, though, or at least he didn't think it was. The guy looked a little too mild-mannered for that. He just looked like a rent-a-cop, no more or less impressive than the one in the mall.

"What are you kids doing?" the guy asked, watching them all troop out, dirty and tired, from the pipe. They all gave him considering stares. Then they looked so disappointed that he actually felt bad. Mike had actually been *hoping* for a military officer, CIA, *something*. Some evidence that Eleven was inside. Even *he* could see that this guy was none of the above.

Dustin broke the silence, from yards away. They heard him panicking through his super-comm. "*Abort abort abort abort*. OVER," he shouted. He had apparently just noticed the guard. The rent-a-cop guy actually laughed. What the hell, they were harmless. He looked at their super-comms, Lucas's bandana, and their camo outfits they had carefully coordinated for their mission. They were just exploring, he surmised. They wouldn't graffiti anything or do drugs or whatever else hooligans did these days. They were just kids, and clearly playing.

"Guys, I know it's fun to explore and all that," he said in a placating voice. As if they were Holly's age. "But you can't go on private property without permission, okay? That can get you into trouble. I'll let you guys back out of the gate now, so you don't have to crawl back through that pipe." He winked at them as if conferring a great favor and Lucas gave such a wide, fake smile that Mike almost laughed.

"Couldn't we-couldn't we just look around a little?"

The guy shook his head. "I can't let you in the building, sorry, kids."

Lucas hastily amended, "like just around the property, we came all this way and you know, we're..." he gestured aimlessly at his camo outfit as if that would explain it.

"Playing commandoes, we just want to look around a little," Will added. Will looked at the guy with huge eyes, and the guy softened. Will had that same magical quality as Eleven, they both looked so gentle and frail that most people tripped over themselves trying to give them whatever the hell they wanted. And, like Eleven, he was so genuinely sweet that he rarely took advantage of it.

The rent-a-cop tried not to smile. "All right guys, that's fine. I'm on my lunch break anyway, so you can play until then, how's that sound? Just stay where I can keep an eye on you." Will beamed at him, looking so unaffectedly happy, the guy couldn't help but laugh. "Go on, guys," he said, and then, lamely, they *actually had to pretend like they were commandoes* for the next half hour. Mike felt like an idiot but it was their best shot. The guy watched them wistfully, sitting on the hood of his car, apparently dreaming of the days of his own callow youth. Mike actually felt disappointed. He would have preferred an armed soldier, to be honest.

Lucas was all business. He could play this kiddie game easily, hadn't they played it just a couple of years before? He could tell they were embarrassed but he went right to it, rolling on the ground and pretending to take aim at Mike. Mike laughed and got on his belly, crawling towards the building as if he were escaping through the jungle. Will was pressed up against the building, conveniently next to a large window, and he took his time in scoping it out.

After ten minutes, they forgot their embarrassment and really got into it. It stopped being a mission to save their friend's life and started being a game. They had *fun* that day, which was the worst part of it for Mike. He knew they felt it, too. How could they play such childish games when one of their party was missing? *No part of the party should be left behind*, and that's exactly that they had done. El had been left behind. First at the school, and then here, at the lab. Where they laughed and played on the lawn of the place that had imprisoned her for 12 years. Mike was overcome with guilt when he thought about it. This place had kept her from being in the world. From being whoever she would have been. It had kept her from

living.

The other guys felt guilty, too, but for a completely different reason. They felt guilty because they had finally let themselves accept something. They had "played" for half an hour, and looked in all of the windows they could reach. A side door had been unlocked, and Lucas had briefly explored inside. Will kept the rabbit looking guy busy by pretending he was dying from a gunshot wound and making the guy pretend to be a medic. The guy seemed happy to be included, and heroically stitched him up and carried him to safety. If this were still a top secret government facility, with a *fucking gate to another fucking dimension* inside it, it would not have been so fucking easy to get into. *And they were known* here. The agents knew exactly who they were. It was highly unlikely they would just let them play on the front lawn.

Right?

Lucas wiped the sweat from his face and looked at Dustin, to see if they were on the same wave-length. They usually were. Dustin gave him such a sad smile that Lucas had to blink back sudden tears. The place was fucking *deserted*. If El were here, there would be more guards. *Better* guards. If El were here, they would have been escorted off the property immediately, and that was sort of a best-case scenario. They had found no fucking sign that El had *ever* been there, no sign that the secret government assholes had been either.

The place was fucking *dead*. Lucas, Dustin, and Will left that day, united with one conclusion.

So was she.

Dustin and Lucas refused to search for her any more. They broke the news to Mike, as mildly as they could. He didn't want to hear it. Refused *their* refusal, but they kept talking. They didn't want to look for her anymore. They *couldn't* look for her anymore, because she wasn't there. She wasn't *anywhere*. They wanted to hold a fucking *memorial* for her instead. "Mike...maybe it's time we accept it. She's dead."

"SHE IS NOT DEAD."

"Mike. She has to be. Just think about it." And he did think about it, because it was Will who had spoken. Will who never voiced an opinion without being pretty goddamned sure it was correct. Will hated confrontation more than anything (except for coughing up slugs).

"Just listen, okay? You can believe whatever you want, and that's okay. Just listen to me," he said. And Mike listened. He didn't want to, but Will's voice was incredibly gentle. At that moment, he sounded different. Older. He didn't seem like a friend-a friend who was actually a few months younger than Mike. His voice was too comforting, too gentle. He sounded more like a parent as he gradually led Mike to the only conclusion available to them.

"She isn't in the Upside Down."

"The secret government guys are dead or gone or both, whatever. She isn't with them."

"She isn't here in town, because she would come home if she were."

"She's been gone for *months*, Mike. Without a trace."

"I didn't want to tell you this, but the Demogorgon didn't leave a body, either." Mike bowed his head. "And you *know* that she killed it. I didn't want to tell you that, but I've *been* there. I've been right there and there's not a body. Maybe some things don't leave a body when they die over there? We don't know how that works." Mike put his hands over his face.

"Even if she had survived flipping, that means she was in the Upside Down for *months*. What the hell was she *eating and drinking*, Mike? There's *nothing* over there like that. I was there for a week and nearly *died*. It's been *months*." Mike was crying, but Will didn't stop. Didn't let himself stop.

"The air is *toxic* over there. Mom and Hopper had to come in those Hazmat suit things, and again, I nearly died after a week. She's gone, Mike. I'm so sorry." And then Will fell silent, and they all avoided looking at Mike because they couldn't bear to see the broken look on his face. They couldn't bear to know that they were the ones who

made him look that way. Mike looked at them instead, wiping his eyes. He saw that Lucas, Dustin and Will-Will who hadn't even *met* Eleven, not really-were crying, too. They really thought she was dead. He saw that belief in their tears.

"It sucks, man. It fucking *sucks*," Will said, and Mike looked down. Will rarely cursed, which made his words all the more compelling. Still, he tried. He couldn't give up on her. He had *promised*. He swallowed past the lump that hurt his throat so fucking much.

"Will. You were gone for a week. And everyone thought *you* had died. We had a funeral, man. *A funeral*. What if we had just said, '*oh, man, that fucking sucks, Will is dead*', and moved on? What if we hadn't come looking for you? *But we didn't*. We didn't give up on you. We couldn't. We didn't give up on you, and we found you. You're *here*." His voice cracked on the last word.

Will cleared his throat. He has his own lump. "It's different, Mike. Mom and Jonathan and you guys had *signs* that I was alive. I was talking through the lights, through the radio, through El, and even through Jonathan's boom box." He repeated, very quietly and as gently as possible, "*It's been months*." A pause. "None of that has happened. If I could do all of *that*, with zero super powers whatsoever, you can bet that El would have been able to really grab our attention. She made a gate to another *world*, man. Without even *trying*. She had the power to give us a sign." Lucas and Dustin nodded slowly.

"You *know* she would have given you a sign, Mike. *You know that*. But she didn't."

"She didn't, because she couldn't."

"She's *dead*."

And then they held him while he sobbed, and it was good to be held. Good to be held by his friends, by people who loved him as much as he loved them. It was comforting. They all felt it. It was okay to be held like this, not sappy at all, because they had lost someone. They could all feel it. Even Will could feel that something in their warm circle was missing, where someone else should have been. Will had

one more thing to say, but it was the most important thing.

"And Mike...after this long...if it had been me, I would have *wanted* you guys to move on. I wouldn't have wanted you to be like this. I would have *hated* it. I would have wanted you to remember me, and how we were friends, and then just, like, *go on*. *Any* friend would want that. And you were her *best* friend. You know she would want the same." They held him silently until the tears were finished. For now, at least. He knew that they would come back, at any hour of the day, and part of him was happy because that pain that burned his throat meant that she was real, that she had been his friend.

More than his friend.

"We *need* to have a memorial. She deserves one, since she won't ever have a funeral. We're the only people who knew and cared that she existed, so we have to be the ones," Will said. Dustin nodded. "Yeah, seriously, man. *She deserves that*. We could bring all of her favorite things to her favorite place and say goodbye."

"Where was her favorite place, do you think?" Lucas asked. He was careful to speak in the past tense. Mike had to get used to the fact that she was gone. Dustin rolled his eyes.

"Mike's basement, duh. Her fort. Where else?"

"We can't just leave stuff in her fort," Will argued, knowing that Mike needed to take it down. When he was ready. Which he hoped would be soon.

"Okay then, the quarry."

"Why the quarry?"

"That's where she came back to us, after she ran away. She came back and that's when she *really* became one of the party. I think she'd like it there." The other guys seemed to approve. "Monday, four?" Today is Saturday, which would give them enough time to come up with some ideas. The guys, minus Mike, readily agreed. They let him decide on his own if he was ready for that final goodbye, and they tried to let him know it was okay if he needed more time. He

appreciated it, and he appreciated them. He felt a little comforted. It was just comforting to be with people who knew Eleven, who had loved her. He knew he wouldn't go to the memorial. He couldn't do that yet.

"Yeah, plus she broke Troy's arm at the quarry," Lucas added.

"Totally! Oh my god. That was *awesome*," Dustin grinned and even Mike smiled.

"*She* was awesome. She was a great friend," Lucas said.

"Imagine going up against *the Demogorgon*, knowing you weren't going to win. She was really brave," Will said quietly.

"Yeah, she was. And remember when she flipped that van? Oh my god, that was amazing. She was a badass. She like, barely even looked at it and there it was, flying over us." Mike suddenly felt a little trapped, because he knew what they were doing.

They were *already* having her memorial, and making damn sure he was there for it.

He waved goodbye an hour later and headed home. Lucas didn't come with him, he and Dustin were going to the arcade. They invited him but he told them he had to get home. And he did, because his throat was hurting a little. A few blocks from his house, the lump in his throat is worse. A block after *that*, and he hurts all over. He can't tell if it's from grief or something else. Or both.

By the time he opens the front door he no longer cares. His mom feels his forehead and clucks at him, before putting him in bed. He sleeps long enough for her to come back to check on him. She practically carries him to the doctor. Dr. Davis gives him antibiotics, and he goes back home. Takes his first pill. Sits on the couch and turns on the TV. Eats some soup. Looks at the clock. It's 7:15. He's struggling to keep his eyes open until 7:40, because he has to talk to El. He *always* talks to her at 7:40, but does it really matter? What's the fucking point? The thought makes his throat feel worse, and he closes his eyes.

Sleeps.

He sleeps through the night, and only remembers that he missed talking to her when he is eating breakfast the next morning. He freaks out, then freaks out about freaking out. He struggles against his guilt. If she's dead, it doesn't matter if he talks to her or not. Does it? If she's dead, he will have to stop this eventually. Even he knows it's not healthy to keep holding onto something that is never coming back.

And right here, at this moment, he does know.

She *isn't* coming back.

And Will is right, it *fucking sucks*. He decides that he won't use the super-comm tonight, either. He stays out of the basement, where he might be tempted. He watches a lot of TV. Naps. Eats dinner. But at 7:35, he can't stop himself. The habit is ingrained in him and it makes him feel better. This doesn't have to be the day he says goodbye. That's just too final. He can say goodbye a little at a time, until he's finally ready to let her go, once and for all.

So today, at least, he will talk to her. He runs down the hallway and down the basement stairs, nearly knocking Nancy over on the way. He ignores her outraged squawk. He grabs the super-comm, and crawls into the fort that will always be hers, until the day he takes it down. He has never taken it down but now he knows something.

Now he knows that someday, he will.

"Hey, El. Over." His voice is scratchy. He coughs. He eyes his glass of water but leaves it alone for now. "Sorry I didn't call you yesterday. Over." He always talks like that, as if she is just a normal friend that he last saw the day before. It soothes him. He doesn't really know what to talk about this time because the only thing that's happened today is that they've decided she's dead. He looks around the room for inspiration, and notices his water glass again.

"I've got strep throat, and I feel like crap. I just passed out yesterday in front of the TV like my Nana always does. Ov-"he breaks into a fit of coughing-"er." He grabs for his water glass, and takes a hasty sip to

stop the coughing.

And then.

He hears it.

He hears *something*, anyway.

The moment lasts forever, and for less than a second.

In between the last cough, and reaching for the glass.

A tiny sound, or sounds.

There's a slight crackle of static.

A squeak, as if someone cuts the word off.

Then, so faint he can barely hear it, a sigh.

He waits. There's a long, long, long silence. He is both wracking his brains and sitting completely empty-headed. *What was that noise?* It can't be his friends. He is not on channel 6, which is the channel they all use. He is on channel 11, because that's what he thought was the most fitting, way back on day 1.

Of course, it could be *anyone*.

Or it could be *her*.

He is desperately trying to keep his face from changing expression, even though he's alone. He doesn't want to admit hope, not even to himself. Not right now. Not after today.

But...

He's on channel *eleven*.

And it sounded like someone wanted to talk, and then remembered they shouldn't.

Or couldn't.

He feels like he is listening with more than his ears. He is listening with every sense that he has, with every nerve in his body. "Um." He says it quietly, just for something to say, and then quickly lets go of the button, just in case there will be another response. If it *was* a response. For once, he forgets to say "over."

There's nothing. He tries again. "So I'm not feeling that great. Over." He waits. Sighs. "I'm on antibiotics," he says, then pauses. If Eleven were here, she would interrupt. He smiles, thinking of the way she always asked him to explain things. Just for fun, he says, "Antibiotics are pills or little things you swallow when you're sick. They make you feel better and they make sure you don't get anyone else sick with your germs. Over."

He can *almost, almost, almost* hear her. He closes his eyes and pretends she's right here. In his mind, she's looking at him with the trusting expression she has only ever used with him. Because she knows that he will always answer her, and she knows he likes her questions.

What are germs, Mike?

"Germs are things in your body or around you that can make you sick for awhile, but it's no big deal. Like when I cough right now, germs come out. That sounds really gross, I know, but you can't see them or anything. But if you were here-" his voice catches and he pauses.

Is she here, somehow?

"If you were here, you'd probably get strep throat, too, and then you'd be on antibiotics. Over." He pauses again. "I really miss you, El. Over." He imagines a small half-smile, tentative because the mouth still isn't used to having anything to smile about. And he almost hears her.

I miss you, too, Mike.

"I hope that you're okay." It sounds odd to say it, even though it's what he usually says. It sounds odd, but it's true. He now accepts the likelihood of her death. But he will *always* hope that she survived. "I can't really talk much today, because my throat hurts. Over." He

knows that she will be sad, but also that she will understand.

Okay, Mike.

"But um, I heard this song the other day, and it made me think of you. So I'm not going to talk but I'll play it for you, okay? Hang on. Over." He grabs the boombox and shoves the tape in. Once it's in, and rewound, he sticks the super-comm up to the speaker and presses play.

When it's over, he's quiet. He's thinking that he really is fucking pathetic. The day before, he had almost decided that not only was she *dead*, but that he would be sort of okay with that. Because he *had* to be. Now, he's sitting here, talking to her and playing a fucking sappy mix tape. *For a dead girl*. "So that's a little sappy and everything, so don't tell the guys, okay? Over."

What is sappy, Mike?

"Sappy is like, too cheesy. Over."

Cheesy?

And she'd probably think of the cheese she'd eaten on pizza, the one and only time she'd had it.

"Cheesy is like, too sweet or emotional, that kind of thing. Kind of embarrassing. Something that's not for friends. Over."

More than friends?

"Like, you know, for people who are more than friends. Like...when I asked you to the Snow Ball. Over." He thinks of what happened right after asking her to go with him, when he quickly kissed her. It was over as quickly as it happened but it changed everything. He was embarrassed (he's *still* embarrassed) but he's glad that he did. That he took that chance, since it was the only one he would ever have. And now he feels like has plumbed new depths of pathetic. He is talking to a dead girl about a fucking middle school dance and thinking about what kissing her was like.

"Anyway...sometimes cheesy or sappy is okay with some people

when they are more than friends. The guys wouldn't like it but I still think it's a good song...and it made me think of you. I hope you liked it." *Wherever you are.* "Over."

Thank you.

"So...this is good night. I need to take my pill and go to bed. This is day 213. Over." He waits again, listening harder than he ever has before. *Please, El.* He waits for *anything*. For *everything*. Even the crackle of static. He'll take what he can fucking get.

"El?"

Again, he almost hears her. In his mind, she tells him good night. And he has to be content with that, because at least he can still do that. He can think about her. He can imagine how a conversation between them could go. He can remember her, whenever he wants, no matter where she is or what happened to her. That will have to be enough. "Good night, Eleven. Over and out." He waits a full minute, looking at his new watch and watching the second hand pass around. Still hoping there will be a response. Any response.

There's just radio silence.

13. Day 218-The Picture

The Picture

It's a Friday, and Mike is over at Will's. The other guys will be showing up eventually, but for now, it's just them. Will's been showing off a new X-Men comic, but Mike isn't interested. Not this time. He's a little distracted. He can't stop staring at the new pictures on Will's bulletin board. Will *always* has new pictures, because Jonathan always takes them. And it's never bothered Mike before. These do. They just remind him of something he's been trying not to think of. Something he's been trying to avoid. And he can't really avoid thinking about it when it's staring him right in the fucking face.

There's a group picture of them, playing a new Atari game. There's a group picture of them at the arcade. There's a group picture of them at Christmas. It's a good one, because it was snapped right when Lucas and Dustin were hitting each other. Will and Mike are laughing at them. There's a group picture of them just talking and laughing, and that's a good one, too. They are all good photos. There's only one thing wrong with them. It may be a group photo, but they are not all in the picture. Part of the group is missing. And will *always* be missing.

And seeing these photos, seeing his friends laughing and having a good time, makes Mike feel sick. Looking at these photos makes him remember that he will never see her again. And he doesn't even have a picture of her. She saved their lives. She was their friend. She was *more* than his friend. And he's terribly afraid that someday, he won't remember what she looks like. What she *looked* like. He's afraid that certain details will escape him, no matter how hard he tries to burn them into his memory. Maybe he won't remember the exact shade of her eyes. Or how expressive those eyes were. They could speak even when she didn't open her mouth. When her eyes spoke for her, Mike always understood. Or maybe he'll forget the way she looked at him, so trusting, like she could always count on him. She trusted him from the very beginning. The very second they met. She always looked at him that way, and he doesn't even have a picture.

That's what pictures are *for*, to remember things. Little details that

would otherwise escape you. The exact way a person smiled, or laughed, or the tiny details of their face that you might forget, if you didn't have the picture to remind you. A picture is evidence that a person existed, and that they were real. And loved. A picture means that you will never, *ever* forget that person. You can't, because they are right in front of you. But he doesn't have a picture of her.

And Mike is afraid of forgetting.

When she disappeared, she left a hole within their circle. But you can't see it in the photos, and it makes Mike sick. When you look at the pictures, you just see a group of friends having fun together. You wouldn't notice that anything-or *anyone*-was missing. Looking at the photos makes him feel like she never even existed, even though he can feel her, or the lack of her, every second of every day.

He's so afraid of forgetting.

And it's not fair. He knows he shouldn't keep telling himself that. It's childish. *Life isn't fair*, is what his mother always tells him when he says those words. But it *isn't* fair. When someone you love dies, it's horrible. And it will always be horrible. But you have the things they owned, to remind you. You have the things they touched, to remind you. And you always have the memory of *them*, preserved inside a picture.

Mike doesn't have any of that. He only has the fort in his basement, where she slept for a week. His sweatshirt and pants that she wore. A wig that he found in the woods. That's all he has of Eleven, and that's all he will ever have. And it's not fair. It's not fair to any of them. Not Dustin, who was also her friend. Not to Lucas, who became her friend and tried to save her. Lucas still lives with the guilt of treating her badly before she left. It's not fair to Will, who only saw her once, and only in the Upside Down. And she *saved* him. Will *deserves* her picture. It's not fair to Mike, because she was his friend. His best friend. More than a friend. And it's not fair to Eleven herself. No one should live, and die, without ever being in a photograph. Without being important enough, and cared for enough, to be in a photograph. It's an insult to the person she was. Brave, and loyal, and sweet. A good friend. A good person. A hero. She deserves to be in a picture. She deserves to be in a *million* fucking pictures.

Someone hits him hard on the shoulder and he stops glaring at the picture board. He turns to look at Will, who's evidently been trying to get his attention for some time.

"Huh?" Mike asks him.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine. What did you say?"

"I was just asking if you wanted a drink?"

Mike isn't very thirsty, actually he's not thirsty in the slightest, but right now he can't wait to get out of Will's room, so he nods. They abandon their comics and head for the kitchen. Mike tries to collect himself. It's okay to be like this with just Will, because Will is dealing with his own stuff. But he needs to pull himself together before the others get here. He forces a smile on his face as Will makes a joke and opens the fridge. Mike leans against the counter.

"Coke?" Will asks him, and Mike nods again. Coke. Fine. Whatever. He really doesn't care. Will starts to shut the fridge, and a drawing slips out from underneath a magnet. It flutters slowly to the floor, and Mike bends to pick it up automatically. He grabs it and starts to hand it to Will, and then his eyes catch on some detail. His brain doesn't even process it. His eyes recognize it before his mind does. His hand freezes on its way to Will's own outstretched hand as he stares at the drawing.

It's one of Will's drawings. He knew that before he even picked it up, because they completely adorn the fridge. And it's good, like all of Will's drawings. That's not what catches his attention. It's the subject.

It's *Eleven*.

Mike suddenly feels a little dizzy, because he hasn't been breathing. He's just been staring at the drawing. He tries to force himself to relax, to just *breathe*, but he can't. It's not just the shock of seeing Eleven, or the fact that Will was able to draw her at all, but seeing exactly how Will drew her. He doesn't want to see it, because he sees this memory in his mind, every day, all day. Every second. This

memory does not deserve a picture, because this memory is terrible.

The drawing shows a girl, standing in front of her friends, with her hand outstretched. It's outstretched toward a monster. The monster is reaching for her. The girl's nose is bleeding. She looks powerful and weak at the same time. Powerful, because she will win. She will kill the monster. And weak, because she is dying. In a moment, she will be gone. And he doesn't know what happened after that. He doesn't know where she is now, or if she's anywhere. He will *never* know, and this drawing is of that moment. He hates it. He hates seeing with his eyes what he can't unsee with his mind. What he sees every time he closes his eyes, or when he loses focus for only a moment.

He looks at Will and thrusts the drawing at him without looking at it again. He doesn't need to. And he can't. He tries very hard not to be angry with Will, but he can't help it.

"Why did you draw that? *How* did you draw that?" And the words are sharper than he intends. He can tell they must be, because Will flinches. Will smooths the drawing and sticks it back under the magnet. Looks helplessly at his friend, who is white with rage and grief.

"I asked everyone," Will tells him quietly. Will's always quiet, but it's an even softer voice than usual. "I asked everyone what she looked like. The guys helped with the, you know..."he trails off, gesturing at the drawing. Mike already knows what the gesture means. Dustin and Lucas are (except for himself) the only ones who witnessed that moment. Of course they were able to describe it. It's burned into their memories, too.

"And mom helped a lot with the other stuff. The way she actually looked." Will looks away because he can't look at Mike right now. Mike is *broken*, and Will can tell. The picture of his friend's face is going to be burned into his own memory now. Will does not mention that he wasn't sure how accurate the drawing had been. Not until now. He knows now that it must be pretty accurate. The knowledge is written on Mike's strained face.

"Why? Why did you draw it?" Mike's voice is toneless now. He's not upset that Will drew her, but why *this* moment? The moment she left

them all? It's awful and gruesome to draw this moment, to try to capture the moment she disappeared.

Will gives a tiny sigh.

"I'm sorry, Mike. But I wanted to. I *needed* to."

"But why?" Mike's voice breaks a little on the last word.

"Because...she saved you guys. You were right there with her. But that's the moment that she saved *me*, too. She saved my life. She killed the Demogorgon. It would have come back for me before my mom and Hopper could get me out. It might have killed them, too. It would have killed all of us, if it hadn't been for her. She was a fucking *hero*," Will says emphatically, and Mike looks at him in surprise because Will rarely curses. Some of the angry tension leaves his body, but he's not even aware of it.

"She saved us all, and she was a hero. She deserves to be remembered that way," Will finishes, and Mike breaks completely. He can't help it, and he certainly can't control it. His face crumples and he starts to cry. To sob. Will's looking at him in alarm and even *that* can't stop it. Mike is suddenly sitting on the kitchen floor and he has no memory of sitting down. Or even intending to sit down. It just happens.

He covers his face with both hands because he doesn't want his friend to see him like this. For *anyone* to see him like this. He's embarrassed and ashamed but he can't help it. And he can't stop it. But it's okay. Will's suddenly sitting next to him and then a second later, Mike is crying on his shoulder. And he has no memory of how that happened, either. But he's so grateful for Will, right at this moment. Dustin and Lucas have grieved with him, but not like this. And Will doesn't try to tell him that everything's okay. That everything will be okay. He doesn't say those worthless platitudes because they aren't true. They are lies, and Will is Mike's friend. And *friends don't lie*. He just holds him and lets him cry.

Mike only utters one sentence. His voice is choked with tears but Will understands him perfectly well. And it breaks his heart to hear it, to know how much his friend is hurting.

"I don't even have a picture of her."

Will doesn't say a word. He certainly doesn't offer Mike the drawing that started all of this, because that would only make it worse for him. Will wants that moment immortalized, but Mike doesn't. And Will understands that perfectly, too. He just holds his friend and tries to give whatever comfort he can.

Several minutes or several hours later, Mike isn't sure, he feels a little better. His face is red and Will's shirt is a mess but Mike is a little calmer. Calm enough to realize that Lucas and Dustin will be here soon, and he doesn't want to see them. Not right now. He just can't. He looks at Will, uncertain of what to say, but Will seems to already know. He's good like that. A lot like Eleven, in a way. He sometimes just *knows*.

"I'll tell them you had to go home," Will says. Mike manages a watery smile and hugs him. Will hugs him back, as hard as he can. Mike makes a stop in the bathroom to splash his face with cold water, and leaves without another word.

At 7:35, he walks down the basement steps, because it's almost time. It's almost 7:40, and he always calls her at 7:40. He will call her every day, until the day he's ready to say goodbye. And that day isn't today.

He crawls into his fort, which will always be *her* fort, and grabs the super-comm. Waits until it's time.

"Hey, El," he says, and even he can hear how exhausted his voice sounds. "It's day 218. I can't believe it's been that long, but I also *can*, if that makes any sense. It's so weird. It feels like I just saw you yesterday, but it also feels like I haven't seen you in years." He trails off, because it's nearly *been* a year. And someday that year will become years. And while he hopes the pain fades, because it's impossible to live with, he also hopes it never does. Because that would mean that he's forgotten. He never, ever wants to forget.

"I went over to Will's today. We looked at comics. Dustin and Lucas were going to come over but I ended up going home." He pauses again, wanting to tell her what happened next, but he can't. It hurts

too much. He can't think about that final moment, the one in Will's drawing. But he *can* talk about her. About wanting a picture of her.

"I don't even have a picture of you. I think that's the worst part. I miss you so much and I can't even look at a picture of you. I'm scared. I'm scared I'm going to forget. I wish I knew how to draw, so I could draw you. So I could at least have that. And. Pictures are for important things. Important people. And *you were important*. Pictures help remind you that something happened. Without one, it's like you never existed. And I can't stand that. *I can't*. I can't stand that I don't have a picture of you, to remind me that you were real. That you were here. That you were important."

And suddenly he's crying again. As hard as he did in Will's kitchen. He's crying so hard, he can't continue. He doesn't even say "over and out," like he always does. He just drops the super-comm and sobs. He cries like that for a long time, oblivious of one thing. An important thing. He's completely unaware that less than 15 miles away, Eleven is crying, too.

The next day, Will lets himself into the basement. All of them do this pretty frequently, but today he hasn't called ahead. Mike isn't expecting him, and that's okay. He doesn't need to see Mike. If Mike's in the basement, that's fine, but it's not necessary. He only came over for one reason. He shrugs his backpack off his shoulders and pulls out a folder. Opens it and removes a drawing. It's a new one, and he hopes it helps. He worked on it for hours last night, with some help from his friends. He had briefly explained the goal, and his friends had come through. They always do. He needed a happier memory to immortalize for Mike, and they gave him one. He's not certain how accurate it is, but he hopes it's close. He places it on the table, on top of the D&D board, and leaves.

Mike finds the drawing later, when he's coming down the stairs at 7:35. He sees it immediately, because he can't miss it. Eleven's face is staring at him from the table. He sits down without being aware of it again, but this time he's in a chair. He picks up the drawing, and just looks at it. Drinks it in with his eyes. Drinks *her* in.

Eleven is smiling a little half-smile, and her eyes look happy and solemn all at once. It's a *trusting* look. It's the way she always looked

at Mike, and it eases something inside him to see it. He may not have a regular picture of her, but he has a drawing.

He will never forget her now, because he will always have that look on her face.

14. Day 300-Soon

Soon

Eleven is dreaming.

It's not unusual, because she dreams every night. Everyone does. Dreaming is *normal*. She knows this, because Mike told her so. Sometimes she remembers the dreams when she wakes and sometimes she doesn't. That, too, is normal. Eleven is usually happy when she discovers something normal about herself, but dreaming never makes her feel that way. Her dreaming isn't completely normal, and she knows it. She learned that from Mike. Back when she was home, and home meant a fort in his basement.

She walks on quiet bare feet to Mike's room. She's had a bad dream, and she doesn't want to be alone. Being alone means worrying that they will find her again. That her dream will be true. She hesitates outside his door.

She doesn't want to wake him up, but she also wants to wake him up. It's a strange feeling, and it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't help her figure out what she should do, either. She doesn't think he will be mad, but she isn't sure. She has to think about it carefully. She doesn't like being woken up when she's tired, and she thinks Mike will probably feel the same way.

Also, he'd told her to stay downstairs in the basement. And she definitely isn't downstairs anymore, she is upstairs. Upstairs means that Nancy or Mike's parents could find her if she keeps hesitating. It's that thought that finally causes her to turn the knob and step into his room.

And he isn't mad. She didn't think he would be, but it's good to know that she was right. He's nice about being woken up in the middle of the night. Nice and Mike are rapidly becoming synonymous for Eleven, although she wouldn't know the meaning of that word. All she knows is that he tries to make her feel better.

"Did you have a nightmare?" His hair is messy and he still looks half-asleep, but he shows no inclination to go back to bed, which makes her feel better.

The word is unfamiliar to her, but it doesn't sound like a good word.

"Nightmare?"

"Yeah. You know, a bad dream? Like, a scary or sad dream?"

Eleven stares at him. Nonplussed, Mike returns the stare until her mouth forms the words. "There are other kinds?"

"What?"

She's not sure if he didn't hear her, or if he doesn't understand her question. Either option seems possible, so she clarifies. A little.

"Other dreams?"

His eyes widen a little and she knows he understands now. She can tell. "You mean, are there other kinds of dreams besides bad ones?"

Eleven nods and Mike breaks eye contact. He turns his face and stares at the wall instead. Then down at his feet, which are bare like hers. He stares at them like they are suddenly very interesting, so Eleven stares at them, too. They just look like bare feet to her, though. He's been quiet for a long time. She's about to open her mouth to break the silence when he finally answers.

"Yeah. There are good dreams, too."

His voice sounds unhappy but she doesn't notice, because the answer is as interesting to her as Mike's feet are to him. She's only ever had scary or sad (or scary and sad) dreams before, so she's feeling an odd mixture of feelings. Excited, because maybe she'll have a good dream someday. Sad, because she hasn't had one before, and she knows it's because she isn't normal. She's had six different bad dreams before, and she has them over and over again. The worst one is the newest one. The one where they find her and take her home. The lab home. Mike's still looking down at his feet when a thought occurs to her.

"How many?"

Mike finally glances up. "Um. I don't know. There's not, like, a certain amount. Everyone dreams different things. You have happy dreams when

you're happy, and bad dreams when you're worried or upset."

That answers the question of why she's never had a good dream before. It means she's never been happy before, which is true. She is happier than she ever has been before, but she's not there yet. Not quite. Not when they are still looking for her. She looks down at her own feet now.

Mike sees the expression on her face and understands, like he almost always does. "Now that you're away from the Bad Men though, I bet you'll start having good dreams. When you really start to feel safe."

But that was over 300 days ago and she hasn't yet. She still has bad dreams. There are so many new ones that she can't even keep count. She feels safe, but the safe feeling means that she has to stay hidden. Away from her friends. And that makes her unhappier than she's ever felt before. She thinks it means that she won't have any good dreams.

But she's wrong.

She's dreaming now. It isn't a bad dream, but it is a confusing one. She knows she's dreaming but it doesn't feel like a dream at all. The sun is shining and it's so bright it hurts her eyes, but she doesn't mind. She hasn't been in the sun for a long time, and it feels good. More than good. She isn't sure where she is at first, because the sun makes it hard to see anything. She squints against the sun and shades her hand over her eyes, but it's not until she turns around that she knows.

She's at the quarry.

It's a familiar location, both in her waking life and the dream one. She has the quarry dream a lot, and she always wakes up gasping, afraid that she was too late to save him even though she knows better.

She's at the quarry but this isn't the quarry dream. It can't be, because Mike and Dustin aren't here. Troy and James aren't here, either, not that she minds. No one is here, except for her. And that's what makes it a confusing dream.

She walks forward a couple of steps, toward the edge of the quarry.

She's careful to keep her footing, even though it's a dream and she knows it won't hurt her if she falls. The sun glints off the water and it's nice. Very pretty. She doesn't know what she's doing here, but she doesn't really care anymore. It's peaceful. It's a good dream and it isn't going to turn into a nightmare. She doesn't know how she knows that, but she knows it anyway.

She sits down gingerly near the edge, close enough that she can see the water while remaining a safe distance. She leans back and tilts her face up a little. The dirt under her palms is warm from the sun and so is she. She relaxes for an interminable amount of time until something changes. Something is different. She feels the prickly feeling on the back of her neck that means she isn't alone.

And she feels something else, something that would make her feel warm even without the sun shining on her. The warmth means that she's happy.

She hears the crunch of gravel and dirt underneath sneakers from behind her, but she doesn't feel the slightest bit of fear that this dream is about to turn into a nightmare. She knows that she doesn't have anything to worry about. She knows she's still safe.

She has the magnet feeling.

She turns her head and he's here.

Right here. Just a few feet away from her.

It isn't the first time she's seen him since facing the Demogorgon, because she uses the blindfold frequently. But it's the first time he's been in her dream. A *good* dream, anyway. She hopes she'll be able to talk to him here. It's the only thing she dislikes about the blindfold. He can't see her or hear her when she uses it.

She can't tell if he'll be able to see her or not, because he's facing away from her. She stands up and takes a step toward him. He doesn't hear her, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he won't be able to. Eleven moves silently without even intending to. It's an instinct she's honed from necessity. She hesitates and realizes she's afraid. What if this is just like the blindfold? What if he can't hear

her? She keeps her eyes fixed on the untidy mop of hair in front of her and takes a deep breath. This is a peaceful dream. A *good* dream. She can feel it. And that means she'll be able to talk to him.

"Mike?"

Her voice is quieter than usual, because she's still afraid. It's almost a whisper. But it doesn't matter, because Mike jerks in surprise. He turns slowly, very slowly, to face her. The expression on his face contracts her heart because she can see everything he's feeling. Shock. Disbelief. Hope. Happiness. She knows it's the expression he will have if *when* he actually sees her again.

"El?"

His voice breaks and he takes a tentative step toward her before hesitating. She can see the fear on his face now and she understands that look, too. He's afraid she'll disappear.

She smiles at him through her tears. Even though she's imagined speaking to him every day for the past 300 days, she doesn't know what to say. She can't remember. He's still staring at her with his mouth open so she has to say something. She pauses, thinking carefully, trying to remember the words she's been planning.

"Mike. I'm here."

She's barely finished before he envelops her in a crushing hug. She doesn't mind. She's crushing him, too.

"El. You're *alive*."

He hugs her for what seems like a very long time, but also a very short time. Not long enough. He must feel the same way, because he pulls away from her but doesn't quite let her go.

"How did I get here? I was reading..." His face falls and he lets her go. "This is a dream." His voice is flat and unhappy.

She meets his eyes in surprise. Is he really here? The real Mike? It doesn't seem possible, because he's never been able to hear or see her before. And she's never tried to touch his mind without being awake.

The dream is suddenly more confusing than ever, but she finds the words to answer him. She has to, because he looks sad. *Broken*. It's a feeling that she knows very well. She can't let Mike feel that way.

"Yes. My dream."

"Wait. *Your* dream?"

He looks hopeful again, so she smiles at him.

"Yes."

"Then...you're alive? Really alive?"

"Yes."

"Are you *sure*?"

The expression on his face tells her he realizes how stupid that sounds. She laughs. They both do.

"Yes."

They're still smiling at each other when a bird caws. Several birds. Mike follows their progress over the water and seems to become aware of their surroundings.

"Um. Why are we here?"

She shrugs and he laughs again.

"Okay. Want to sit?"

She nods and surprises him by taking his hand and leading him closer to the edge. He hesitates and she understands. They both have bad memories here. The same bad memory. Although it ended well.

"It's okay," she tells him, "I won't let you fall."

He smiles. It's a good smile. The *Mike* smile. It always makes her smile, too. They both sit, watching the birds. She's still holding his hand. They're quiet for a few seconds.

"Where are you?"

She turns her face away from the birds. His expression is serious again but she doesn't understand what he's asking. She's right here, and she tells him so.

"No, I mean...not in the *dream*. Where are you?"

She hesitates. She can't tell him that. Can she? Hopper says it isn't safe for him to know. Not yet. And she has to keep him safe, even if it makes him sad. Even if it makes them *both* sad. She looks down at their entwined hands, because she can't meet his eyes anymore. The expression in them hurts her.

"I'm sorry," she says to their hands.

"Why are you sorry?"

"I can't...I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"It's not...it's not *safe*."

She feels the pressure on her hand as he squeezes it involuntarily at her words.

"It's not safe?"

"It's not safe. For you."

"Why?"

"The Bad Men. They know about you. That you hid me before."

He shakes his head impatiently.

"I don't care about that."

Now she's the one squeezing his hand.

"I do."

She uses her free hand to wipe her eyes, because she's crying.

"Eleven. *Please*. Tell me how to find you."

She doesn't have to look up to see that he's crying, too.

"You can't find me. I'm sorry."

They're both quiet for a few seconds. She knows he isn't happy with her answer. She also knows that he doesn't want to hurt her by asking again. She can tell he's struggling and choosing his next words very carefully. When Mike speaks, his voice is resigned. "Will I ever see you again? Will you come back?"

"Yes," she answers, so emphatically that he smiles. "*I'll find you.*"

"You promise?" His mouth is still smiling but his eyes are dark and serious.

"I promise."

He hesitates again. "And...you're okay? You're not hurt? Or in the Upside Down? Or-"

She cuts him off before he can finish babbling. "I'm fine." And when he opens his mouth to speak, she adds, "Promise."

Mike laughs. It's a tiny laugh, but it's a laugh, and the sound makes her happy.

"I miss you," he says quietly.

"I know. I miss you, too."

She leans her head on his shoulder and they sit in silence. She has a thousand questions-they both do-but neither of them speaks. They just take in the view from the quarry together.

Mike's head is resting against hers and his shirt is soft under her cheek. It feels nice. And it's like the hug earlier. It's endless and brief at the same time. Hours or minutes, Eleven isn't sure which. She only knows two things. It's not enough time. And it's all the time they

have. She raises her head and he pulls away to meet her eyes.

"I have to go," she says. She can feel it. She's almost gone.

"I know."

But he hugs her again anyway, as if that could keep her here a little longer.

"El. *When?* When will you come back?"

The words are muffled by her shoulder but she hears them clearly. She whispers the answer into his ear, the answer that Hopper always gives her when she asks the same question. It doesn't take long because it's only one word.

"Promise?"

His voice is still muffled, but she was expecting the question and has no trouble understanding it.

"Promise."

And then she's gone.

She's not hugging Mike anymore, but she's still hugging something. She pulls away slightly and sees the shiny black eyes of her bear. She sighs and turns onto her back, staring at the ceiling. It was a good dream. The *best* dream. But she's learned something important about dreams. Something that Mike never told her. Even the best dreams can be sad, because they aren't real. And eventually you wake up.

She'd like to go back to sleep and try to find the dream again, but she isn't sleepy anymore. She's very tired, but that's not the same thing as sleepy. She sits up in bed, thinking that maybe she can watch TV if she keeps the sound low so Hopper can't hear. Her stomach growls and she decides it wouldn't hurt to have a midnight snack, either, even if it isn't actually midnight.

She swings her legs out of bed and reaches for the lamp. Her hand is halfway there when she feels something wet on her face and she pauses in surprise. She shouldn't be surprised, because she's felt it

more times than she can count. But she's never felt it after waking up before. After dreaming. Her nose only bleeds when she uses her power. She switches the lamp on and dabs lightly under her nose to verify what she already knows. And what it means. It must be easier to communicate when he's asleep and his mind is fully open. She looks at the blood on her finger and smiles.

A few miles away, Mike Wheeler opens his eyes.

"El?"

But she's gone. And for some reason he's staring stupidly up at the sun. He blinks groggily at the sun that's nearly blinding him, before he realizes it's his lamp. He rolls away from the light, trying to get his bearings. He's in his bed. His lamp is on because he was reading. He must have been more tired than he thought. He sits up, rubbing a hand over his eyes. He sighs.

He checks his watch and sighs again. Tomorrow's a school day, the hour is late, and he doesn't feel remotely tired anymore. He extracts his book from under the pillow and sets it on his nightstand before switching off the lamp. He laces his hands behind his head and contemplates the ceiling in the darkness.

It isn't the first time he's dreamed about her, but it was definitely the most vivid. He always wakes up near tears if he has an Eleven dream and irritable if he doesn't. He's well-aware of Eleven's recent discovery about dreams but this one is different. He doesn't feel sad at all. He feels...hell. He doesn't *know* how he feels. He stares at the ceiling, trying to think. He's almost drifted back into sleep when it hits him and startles him awake. He recognizes the swooping feeling in his chest now. It's not sadness, not even close. It's the opposite. Excitement. Happiness.

Hope.

And suddenly his heart is racing and he can't shut his mind off, although he would like to. He's felt hope before, and it always makes him feel even worse after. But he can't help it. He can't drown out the thoughts.

She's alive.

It's been 300 days. Almost a year. If she were coming back, she would have by now.

She said it wasn't safe.

She didn't say anything, it was a fucking dream.

But it didn't feel like a dream. It felt real.

Dreams always feel real, idiot.

But I felt her. I could see her. And she looked different, older. And her hair-

He bolts upright in bed again. The excitement is back.

Her hair.

She'd had hair. Dark, curly hair. Why would he dream about her like that? He never even thinks of her with hair. When he imagines her, she looks exactly the same as she did when he knew her. Short hair, nearly buzzed to the scalp. He has no idea if she'd have straight or curly hair if she grew it out. He's never even thought about it and it gives credence to the idea that it might have been more than a dream.

He doesn't feel like an idiot for considering the idea because Eleven isn't a normal girl. Not in the slightest. She opened a gate in between dimensions and defeated a monster. And she found Will and Barbara in the Upside Down, just by thinking about them. It isn't a stretch to entertain the idea that she can communicate through a dream. And it gives him hope. The dream may mean nothing or it may mean everything, but he doesn't care to contemplate it anymore. He relaxes back under his blanket, smiling a little. He feels happier than he's felt in a long time. In 300 days, actually. She'd whispered something in his ear, just one word, before disappearing. He can still hear her.

Soon.

15. Day 353-The Greater Good

Eleven is not going to wait any longer.

She has been patient.

She has been a good girl.

She has waited 353 days, and she will wait no longer, because it suddenly seems like 353 days too many.

She has come to believe that Hopper never intends for her to be free again. This sudden realization makes her angry, but she understands. He isn't like Papa. She knows it isn't because he is scared *of* her, in awe of her power. Hopper is scared *for* her, and that is different. She knows it's to keep her *safe*, but she also knows that it means he has lied.

He has lied for *the greater good*.

He practically told her so the day they talked about it the first time, and she didn't understand. Not then. She was too busy learning to be *normal*. Now, on day 353, she knows. He thinks it's for *the greater good* that no one knows she is alive, besides him.

The lie keeps them all safe, everyone on her list.

The lie keeps her safe, too.

But now she knows something else about safety. Her idea of safe is very different from Hopper's. She knows it isn't just physical safety, from the Bad Men with guns. She knows there's another kind, and it's the kind you find with your friends. It's the safety of knowing that people care about you, and you care about them, and you look out for each other. And she knows she has people who care about her. They are all on her list. Even though they think she is gone, they are still looking for her. Looking out *for* her. They are being her friends, and she is letting them down.

She isn't looking out for anyone right now.

She is letting them suffer.

She can hear it in Mike's voice. She's heard it every day for the last 353 days.

He is not *safe*, no matter what Hopper says, because he is hurting. He isn't safe inside, and that is just as important as the other kind of safety. She can change that. And if she has to, she can keep him safe the other way, too. She's done it before.

She has to tell him she is alive.

She doesn't do it right away, right after she hears him. Even though she wants to, more than she's ever wanted anything before. She has to wait, because she understands the reasoning behind Hopper's lie. She needs to do the right thing, even if it hurts. She needs to make sure that she's doing it for *the greater good*, which means not for herself. Not for her own happiness, and the fact that she misses all of them.

She tries to think about what is best for them, what will keep them safe, and she has decided.

It is unsafe to be a bad friend, to know that you are hurting someone when you don't have to. It is unsafe to be a bad friend, and to lie to your friends by pretending to be dead for 353 days, and ignoring the pain she has caused and is still causing.

She does not want to be a liar to her friends.

Friends don't lie, and they are definitely her friends.

She knows this, because they are on her list.

So, the answer is simple. She won't lie anymore.

She knows how to do it now. She does not need to be kept safe. She is not like them. *She* will keep them *safe*, because she is not normal like them. She has power, and she can use it.

She has used it before.

And she will use it again, on whoever tries to make them unsafe.

She is done with waiting and she is done with being safe, at least in the way that Hopper means. She knows now, he doesn't understand. How can he? He doesn't have any friends. He doesn't have a list. He has no one, and she wants to have someone. She wants to have *many* someones, but especially Mike. She will tell them the truth, even though Hopper will be angry. It will be okay. She will tell them the truth because she has to.

It is for *the greater good*.

16. Day 354-The Monster

Eleven is finally ready. She has decided how to do it. She thought about responding to Mike last night, or calling him herself, but it didn't seem right. She knows Mike will need more than that. It was dark and Hopper was home, so she couldn't leave, and she knew that this should be done in person. She knows it's what Mike will want.

She waits until Hopper is at work. She is alone, but this time, the TV is off. She is watching her watch-Mike's watch. She remembers, very well, meeting him that day under the power lines behind his house at 3-1-5. She knows he rides home from school that way, and that's where she will be. She will see them all again. She can hardly believe it, but she can't stop smiling. She leaves early, blinking at the sun that she hasn't felt on her skin in so many days. It is a nice, pretty day, and she feels nice, too. She is wearing jeans and a T-shirt, which is nothing special, but her short hair looks nicer than when they last saw it, and that makes her feel good. She feels *normal*, just a girl going to meet her friends.

She is at the power lines now.

She wonders, how should she do this? Just stand here, and let them see her as they ride or walk up to her? Or hide, and surprise them? Although, she knows it will be a surprise for them either way.

But she's wrong about that. Eleven is in for the surprise instead.

It is 3-2-0 and they aren't here. She sees other kids coming by, but no one pays her any attention, and she likes that just fine. She knows that school is out, but the boys aren't here. She remembers that sometimes they stay after school, to play with the radio. She broke the radio when she was trying to find Will, but maybe they have a new one.

She settles in to wait, figuring that they will come this way eventually, but she's too restless to sit still. It's surprising but also not. She's usually very good at keeping still. But she has promised herself that she is done waiting, and so she is. She will go to them since they are taking too long. She gets up and walks quickly, purposefully. She

has to ask for directions because she doesn't quite remember how to get there, but it's okay. And probably unnecessary.

The school is right in front of her, and there are still some students, but not very many. School is out, but they are still in there. They must be, because they weren't at the power lines. In a copse of trees, where she is still mostly hidden, she closes her eyes and reaches herself out.

And finds them.

They are all here.

They aren't together, which disappoints her a little. Will is easy to find, and he is alone. Lucas and Dustin are further away but she ignores all three of them in search for someone else. And it's easy, so easy, to find him. Mike is closest, and she is glad, because she wants to see him first, anyway. She ignores the students milling around and laughs to herself. It feels so different from the last time she was here in the daylight, when she was so scared to see so many people all together. Now she doesn't care, because her friends are here, and she has kept them waiting too long.

She pauses once when she passes the bikes, because Mike's bike is here. Of course. She touches it gently, remembering the last time she was on it. With Mike. The thought breaks into her reminiscence and she leaves the bike behind without a backward look. She throws the doors open and strides through them as if she belongs here, because, at least for today, she *does*. She walks, pausing occasionally to adjust her course, because she can sense him. Like a magnet. She feels all of them that way. And she will find them, one by one.

Suddenly she is so close and she can feel her heart *contract, contract, contract*. She makes a wrong turn because the feeling is so distracting, but it's okay. She hears him. Not with her mind, but with her ears. She quickly backtracks and follows the sound.

Now she is feeling afraid again, but it's a good kind of fear. It's not the bad fear feeling, but infinitely more confusing. It's impossible to understand so she dismisses it. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter, because she is walking up to the last door—the *only* door—separating

them. She's feeling a little shaky. She looks in the little glass square because she just wants to *see* him first, really see him. Maybe it isn't fair, but it's what she needs.

And he's there.

Right there, right in front of her. For the first time in so long. He has his back to her, but she knows it's him. She knows because of the magnet feeling. And unlike the last time they were separated by glass, there aren't any bad men around. There is no one around to keep them apart. She smiles a little and cries a little at the same time, and that is *definitely* confusing. But she doesn't care. She starts to push the door open, and then stops.

Frowns.

He's with a friend, and it's not someone she knows. It isn't Lucas, Dustin or Will.

It's someone new.

A girl.

She pauses for a second, feeling shaky again. She tells herself that it doesn't matter. After all, *she* is friends with more than one person. She is friends with more than one *boy*. She is friends with Mike, Lucas, and Dustin-and she will be friends with Will. It's okay to have more than one friend. So it's okay if Mike is friends with this girl.

She tells herself that, but she is lying. And this time she is lying to herself.

And she *hates* being a liar.

Eleven isn't analytical. She doesn't understand how to analyze a situation, but she's trying, anyway. Why does it matter if Mike has a new friend? Someone she doesn't know? It doesn't mean he doesn't want to be her friend, too. Does it? And why does she suddenly feel so awful? She wants Mike to have friends. He is the best person she knows, and he deserves them. So what is wrong? What is keeping her from opening the door?

She left her hiding spot because Mike needed her. Because Mike was unhappy. She could hear it in his voice, but more than that, she could *feel* it.

But...Mike doesn't look unhappy.

At all.

The girl is laughing, rolling around Mike on *something*-Eleven doesn't really understand it. She just knows that the girl is happy, and Mike...

Mike is happy, too.

She can see it in his face. Eleven may not know very many things, but she is an expert at reading Mike's face. It's completely relaxed. He is *looking* at the girl and *smiling* at the girl and *laughing with* the girl, and she sees no trace of the events of the last year in his face. There is no trace of *her*. He has forgotten her.

She just breathes for a second, taking it all in.

Mike is still her friend. He still calls her every night, and he misses her. She would know this even if he never said it, because she can always hear it. But he does say it. Every night.

And maybe he does. She doesn't really understand how he could sound so broken last night and look so happy today, but she knows she isn't good at understanding things sometimes. Sometimes she just doesn't know things.

But she does know *something*.

She knows he isn't feeling the magnet feeling. Not anymore, not like she is. If *he* were on the outside of the door, she would *know*. She would feel that pull.

Mike can't.

He isn't looking for her; he is looking at the girl. He has no idea she is so close, that all he has to do is turn his head and bring her back into his life. She isn't angry-not with *him*- she is just sad. She tries to

reason with herself. He doesn't have the power that she has. Maybe *normal* people can't feel that magnet feeling.

She isn't sure. She always thought Mike could, even if the ability is beyond everyone else. Why else would he call her every night? Why wouldn't he give up, unless he felt it? She doesn't know.

She just knows what she sees in his face, which is nothing. Nothing *for* her, nothing *of* her. It's different from what she sees in her own face when she looks in the mirror. She doesn't see any of that *missing* feeling in his face.

What she sees, is both better and worse.

She sees a boy who is letting go. She sees a boy who is becoming happy again. He is becoming *normal* again. She understands suddenly that being with her last year made them *all* not-normal, but without her, they can be that way again. They can forget. They can move on.

And who knows, better than she? Normal is nice. Normal is *everything*. She knows that, because she has been trying to be normal for so long.

And that is the good part.

Mike will be happy.

She sees that now, and realizes that his radio communication is just his way of saying goodbye. Of letting her go. And she has to do the same, to let him become *normal* again. She can't deny that normal feeling to *anyone*, and especially not Mike.

But it hurts. It more than hurts. And that is the bad part.

It feels like fighting the Demogorgon again. Something that she knows she won't survive-or if she does-she will be changed, and diminished. There will be a little less of the person Eleven, and more of the number Eleven. The experiment. And it breaks her heart. She doesn't know how to handle this sudden grief, so she stares at the girl. She stares at Mike. She tries to breathe.

The girl is completely *normal*.

Eleven can see it in her face.

She can even see it in her hair, long and wavy and red.

It's not particularly nice hair; it's not shiny and soft looking like Nancy's. It looks tangled and unkempt, but the color is bright and alive and just looking at it makes Eleven feel tired somehow. And her own thoughts are making her tired, too, because parts of her are arguing inside. Part of her insists that he will be happy to see her, even if there is a new friend. That she will *always, always, always* be his friend, too.

And she almost listens.

But the stronger part of her speaks to her, too. Here is what it says:

Mike deserves normal, and he can be normal again. He can be safe. He can let her go, and be happy. Happy in a way she will never understand, because she will never be normal. She will never be able to move on. She is stuck with her past and coming back won't change anything, not for her. She will never be a real person, not like them.

She will never be El.

She understands that now.

Hopper was right.

She has to let him go. She has to let *him* let *her* go. Sooner or later biting her lips won't work anymore, and she will say those words. And she can't say them, because Mike is her friend. She can't say them. She has to go. And although it sometimes hurts him, it won't always. It's her way of being a good friend, because only a good friend would be able to do the right thing, even if it hurts. And it is the right thing, because it will keep him *safe* and *normal* and *nice*. And those are Mike-things that she likes.

But there is something else.

She hates the girl.

Not because she is new, not because she is Mike's friend, but because

she has made Eleven realize she can never come back. She has made Eleven understand that Mike can be happy without her. That he *should* be happy without her. It isn't the girl's fault, but Eleven hates her, anyway. She is suddenly overcome with her power, and it's strong. She doesn't know what to do with it, but she has to do *something*. She is in a black rage, a killing rage, and she wants to hurt the girl with the long hair.

The power doesn't extend to Mike.

Mike is happy and safe, and he will stay that way. She will never hurt Mike.

Eleven imagines squeezing the girl's brain, like she did with the Bad Men, until blood comes out of her nose and eyes and ears. She imagines throwing her against the wall, and breaking every bone she has. She imagines breaking the girl's neck just by jerking her own.

Her heart is racing and her heart is broken and she is *so, so, so* close to letting the power out until she looks at Mike again. He is happy. *Finally* happy, after 354 days. She will hurt him if she kills the girl, and she can't do that.

But she can't really do *nothing*, either, can she? She has to do *something*, because the power has never been this strong. Not when she killed the Demogorgon. Not when she killed the Bad Men. Not when she opened the gate. Not ever. It is all she can think and feel, until there is nothing else. There is no Eleven, there is just power. And it has to come out. It will come out.

And the idea, the *feeling*, shocks her. She knows what *shock* means, because it's the way she's feeling right now. It means that part of her is alive; a part that she has never even suspected existed.

She can feel the power reach for *Mike*.

She has only used her power against him twice, and that was to keep him *safe*. She has never, ever, ever wanted to hurt Mike.

She still doesn't.

But part of her does.

She came back to make him happy and protect him and keep him safe with her power.

But she was wrong.

There is nothing to protect him from that is greater than herself.

She understands, finally, that she will never be *safe*. Not for anyone else. Her power stands in the way. It always has. It always will. And she understands something, for the first time.

She may not be the monster, not yet, but she *could* be.

And it would be easy. So easy. She doesn't want that to happen. She can't let that happen.

She doesn't hurt Mike.

She doesn't let her power hurt Mike. She grits her teeth and takes control of it and turns it away from him and back inside her, but she has to do something. She has to let it out a little. She settles for shoving the girl off her board. She can hear the girl cry out but nothing is broken, no one is dead, and they are all (relatively) safe.

And that's it. She can let go. She has to.

She takes one last look through the glass, because she needs to memorize this moment. She will need to remember it later, just in case her resolve fails.

Mike is leaning over the girl, asking if she's all right.

The girl is flustered and Eleven-she will never be El again-hears her say that it was like a magnet swept her off of her board.

She sees Mike freeze, and *she* knows that *he* knows. He can feel it. They are both feeling it. Finally, and just a little bit too late. And Eleven moves very, very, very quickly. He snaps his head to the door with lightning quick reflexes, but hers are faster. She is already down the hall and through another door before she hears the first door open as someone sprints into the hall. She hears his shoes hitting the floor. She hears the door bounce off the wall. She hears *everything*.

He doesn't say a word.

Not with his mouth.

But she can still hear him.

EL? ELEVEN!

Over and over again, not with his mouth but with his mind.

In her mind.

It hurts her head because he's shrieking it.

The hope and pain she hears makes her pause for only a second and she realizes two things. The first is that he hasn't forgotten. Not yet.

The second is that he still isn't sure.

Almost, but not quite. Part of him believes she's here but not all of him. He doesn't have the magnet feeling. If he doesn't see her, the feeling will fade. He will forget about it.

And that is good.

That is good for him, because it keeps him safe from her and what she could do. It is good for herself, because she would rather die than hurt her friend, and she can't always control her power. She sees now that sometimes it controls her. And that's why she only lets herself pause for a second and then she is out the door and past his bike and back in the trees. And she can still hear his mental voice, it hasn't faded yet. But it's easier to ignore than she thought it would be.

He isn't like her. He is grieving but he will get over it. And while that grief hurts him and hurts her, it isn't anything like her grief. And what she can do with it. He is just *normal* and that's all right. As for those 353 days he called her, they belong to the past. A different Eleven. The one that wanted to be normal more than anything.

She will be okay with being not-normal.

She has to be.

When she can no longer hear him, and knows that he has given up, she feels almost peaceful.

And just like that, Eleven lets him go.